

The Writing of Trespass

1. Bar Talk and Other High Theory

One night during the 2010 Western Literature Association conference in Prescott Arizona, Laurie Ricou turned to a group of us who were drinking together in The Eagles' Nest Lounge and said, "Well, I don't know what that stuff is about. My work is undertheorized." He waited, looked around, took another drink. "For example," he said, "intradiegetic. What the hell kind of word is that?" He shook his head, got up, and minutes later I heard him muttering to someone across the room. "Is that intradiegetic?" he asked, pointing to her glass of wine.

It was the sort of comment I always expect from Laurie, both irreverent and indicative of a certain scholarly, intellectual, and pedagogical disposition (much of Laurie's critical work parallels his teaching initiatives, for which he was awarded a Killam Teaching Prize in 2002). Laurie's longstanding relationship with the Western Literature Association, an annual conference that brings together scholarly, creative, and activist work that engages the regions west of the Mississippi River, demonstrates the interdisciplinary focus he shares, one that seeks to break down the divide between teaching, research, study, writing, and action. Laurie's scholarship, from his earliest book, *Vertical Man/Horizontal World: Man and Landscape in Canadian Prairie Fiction* (1973), has consistently engaged with the question of human accommodation to a world continually accommodating the human. His second book, *Everyday Magic: Child Languages in Canadian Literature* (1987), explored the ways in which Canadian authors imagined through language the knowledge peculiar to children. Following this, Laurie's work increasingly turned toward ecological considerations, with each of his

books—*A Field Guide to “A Guide to Dungeness Spit”* (1997); *The Arbutus/Madrone Files: Reading the Pacific Northwest* (2002); *Salal: Listening for the Northwest Understory* (2007)—taking up questions of region: as an ecological, political, cultural, and economic zone; as a place that witnesses the interface between instrumental and sacred relations with environment; as a material experience that draws teachers and students of literature into the field. Laurie’s later work is multi-generic, interpolating various texts, critical methodologies, disciplinary specialties in order to destabilize areas of critical, legal, and political jurisdiction. His work engages with the environment in a way that is critical of the pre-emptive systems of knowing, often embodied in genre, that we bring to it.

The Prescott conference wasn’t the first time I witnessed Laurie’s suspicion of jurisdictional cant. That would be when I asked him in 1997 to be part of the supervisory committee for my dissertation, which was on a literary movement called “dirty realism.” Instead of answering “Yes” or “No” Laurie asked to meet at Koerner’s Pub, where he sat with me over beer and said he didn’t know much about the authors I was studying, or the scholarship, not to mention the theory, but he was more than happy to serve in an editorial capacity on the committee. “Anyhow,” he finished, “I’m always happy to be part of something that’s dirty.”

In Paris, almost ten years later, Laurie delivered what I still consider the best conference paper I’ve ever had the luck to attend. It was a keynote, I think, delivered on the last day of the conference, and prefaced by the passing out of a bouquet of tulips to the audience. It dealt primarily with Michael Pollan’s *The Botany of Desire*. In the middle of this hilariously associative take on the conference theme—“Tropes and Territories”—Laurie paused, then said, “I think I’ll skip the theoretical part of this paper,” turned five pages, and said to a friend in the audience, “Smaro, you can read that later,” then continued where he’d left off. I’d never seen any scholar use literary theory that way before, at least not in public.

How Laurie was talking in this paper, “The Botany of the Liar”—later published in *Tropes and Territories: Short Fiction, Postcolonial Readings, Canadian Writings in Context*—is almost as important as *what* he was talking about. The article is written in sections, most of them no more than a few paragraphs long, and jumps associatively from one idea to the next in a way that makes the reader (or this reader, anyhow) wonder if he’s following the track of a definite argument or playing around. Ultimately, the text is about reversals of meaning, of “de-territorializing the human animal” (355)

in order to think about how we, humans, are also a “territory” upon which the environment acts, and thus calls for a recognition of how we also “form the story” in the narrative of other species (in this case plants).

The first three sections of “The Botany of the Liar” discuss, in succession, a metaphor for the short story as a kind of “short circuit” that is simultaneously “a surge of energy” and “a loss of power”; a comparison of the words “lyre” and “liar” to articulate the simultaneity of silence and speech, absence and substance, in the lyric (346); and the importance of appreciating the “otherness” of plant life through the juxtaposition of literature with place, creating yet another short circuit in which the project of “[reading] a plant” (347) measures its success by its failure, by arriving at that otherness in the process of trying to know it, which is to appreciate the difference between our knowing and whatever it is—entirely beyond our conception—that occurs as the plant itself. These jumps are themselves instructive in a similarly negative sense, since ultimately the article demonstrates false starts and inversions—the suggestion that we are as “used” by the environment as we in turn “use” it. The instrumental is never a one-way street. Laurie thus questions the illusion that suggests human remove and, by extension, mastery. This loss of mastery is demonstrated in our attempt to read his skittering text, only to realize that it has been using our expectations against us.

One reason why this works so well is that Laurie’s later texts, from *A Field Guide to “A Guide to Dungeness Spit”* onward, are not quite scholarship, nor personal essays, nor creative non-fiction. They are exploratory (which means they offer at once discovery and disorientation), never quite sure where they are (and thus, by extension, readers are never quite sure where *they* are). It means they are also, like a good conversation, engaged in both speaking and listening, or, rather, they offer a kind of speaking that is like listening—self-questioning, risking contradiction, doubling back on suppositions, tackling divergent and apparently random materials, to constantly enlarge the frame of reference. This, as Greg Garrard tells us, is in keeping with the ecocritical concerns of the texts:

Environmental problems require analysis in cultural as well as scientific terms, because they are the outcome of an interaction between ecological knowledge of nature and its cultural inflection. This will involve interdisciplinary scholarship that draws on literary and cultural theory, philosophy, sociology, psychology and environmental history, as well as ecology. (14)

Garrard’s argument is that “environmental problems,” because they involve a host of causal agents, as well as multiple remedies, invoke a host of

disciplines, and hence different texts and genres. One such “problem,” as *Field Guide* illustrates, is itself the cordoning-off of knowledge into “disciplines”—each with its own exclusive set of “terms” and argumentative modes—which frequently do not speak to one another. Laurie’s texts, like those suggested by Garrard, are extra-generic, not quite literary scholarship, not quite memoir, not quite taxonomies. In this way they suggest that an engagement with place demands never really settling into one, that the writing remain as processual as place itself. Such an extra-generic status is an ethical engagement with the world, never assuming a correspondence between the writing of environment and environment itself. This kind of writing is enabled by a shifting kaleidoscope of genres and references that continually destabilize too-easy accommodations or vantage points vis-à-vis given regions or ecosystems, ultimately making any accommodation to region, other than a dwelling in uncertainty, impossible. In Laurie’s case, this uncertainty isn’t that of a dry analysis that attacks the foundations of logic or theology or metaphysics, but something closer to a willed naiveté, even wonder, in sensual and experiential engagement with the environment—a refusal to let the mind do all the talking (or, more appropriately, walking). At the same time, Laurie is not afraid to risk and test instrumental relations with the regions he explores, and in some cases even celebrate the history of such relations as expressed in the given folkways of, in particular, the Lower Mainland/Pacific Northwest, since it is this that makes for “regionalism,” the story of a particular people living and laboring according to particular geographical and cultural priorities.

2. Over and Under the Theory

In light of this kind of uncertainty, in this refusal to abide in some purely intellectual position, I’d like to think about what is meant by “undertheorized” in the context of Laurie’s work. Since that conversation in Prescott I’ve spent some time thinking about this term, often used pejoratively for work deemed insufficiently rigorous, out of touch with current critical apparatuses. Oddly enough, I’ve never heard the word “overtheorized” (though I’ve heard the sentiment), and you’d think it would be a natural counter-term. I write all this as a fan of theory, which I use consistently in my own work. Maybe I’m at risk of overtheorizing Laurie’s undertheorizing, but as part of that teaching moment at The Eagles’ Nest I do want to consider how the term might point to a critical and pedagogical practice—at least in ecocriticism—without invoking the pejorative suggestion of a bad work ethic.

Laurie's work ethic, at least as a university instructor, is unimpeachable. For one, there is the Killam Teaching Prize I've already mentioned. For two, there is the ample anecdotal evidence, often on display at panels and papers at the WLA, and in articles such as that of Nicholas Bradley (see below). Any current or former student of Laurie I've ever met (myself included) invariably describes odd, outrageous, classroom antics. One student in my graduate cohort recounted giving a seminar presentation that involved the eating and throwing of fruit in the classroom, an activity Laurie enthusiastically engaged in. (I'm not sure whether he hit anyone.) Another anecdote, less flagrant but still weird for an English seminar (at least in my experience), involved Laurie taking his class into the forests surrounding the University of British Columbia and having them pick out one plant they would then study for the remainder of the semester, encouraging them not only to examine literary but also cultural, scientific, and popular treatments of particular flora, and, beyond that, to imaginatively consider *being the plant*. Finally, if you type "Laurie Ricou" and "teaching" into a Google image search, the second picture that pops up features Laurie painting a garbage dumpster, above the caption, "Painting a dumpster with students of ENGL 492 (Writing the Pacific Northwest)," making me wonder, What is he painting? What percentage of the course mark does that account for? Did he provide feedback? This pedagogical engagement recalls not only the words of Garrard on the necessary interdisciplinarity of ecocriticism, but, more importantly, the necessity of engaging imagination as much as intellect in teaching and study. Such engagement is the operating principle of a text such as *Field Guide*, whose multiple-references, quotations, and collage-like construction, suggest, as much as "Botany of the Liar" does, the impossibility of distinguishing ourselves from an environment, here understood to mean not only the region, or natural world, but also the multiplicity of texts, genres, and thus modes of thinking we comprise and that in turn comprise us. If the natural world uses us as much as we use it, if there is no "remove" that privileges mastery from the mastered, then it is equally true that our relationship with texts is likewise inflected with a circularity—we deploy texts, texts deploy us—that calls into question instrumental reasoning, and the possibility of applying it in any straightforward, deterministic fashion, not to mention in a way (important for ecocriticism) that won't also *affect us*. An awareness of this circularity is evident in Laurie's dedication to *The Arbutus/Madrone Files: Reading the Pacific Northwest*: "for my students, because they have been my teachers" (v). This sense of process, where

imparting information naturally engages one in receiving information, suggests that any teacher must by necessity also be a student—this is the very responsibility called for by the position—always receptive, tailoring or adjusting the approach in response, playing but one part in the group improvisation that is the classroom, and thereby emerging with as much gained as provided. Laurie's texts also invoke this bilateral process of teaching.

The Arbutus/Madrone File, like *Field Guide*, is interested in the ways in which connections are also disconnections, in which boundaries both separate and join, in which classifications entail both micro- and macroscopic views: "The slash separating and joining Arbutus and Madrone figures the artificial/real border that contributes to the region's doubleness and fluidity. It allows for either/or, and for a both that is a uniquely interdependent fusion" (1). In focusing on the different name given the same ecological phenomena in different regions and countries, Laurie is drawing our attention to a number of important considerations—language, bio-region, culture, nation, scholarship, the artificial and the real—in all of which divisions are also marks of connectedness. What divides also brings together, necessitating recognition of contingency, and communication.

This use of the slash, not incidentally, is precisely what Jacques Derrida—and Laurie is going to hate me for this—refers to as the "mark" that at once determines and destabilizes genre. In his essay, "The Law of Genre," Derrida argues that belonging to a genre is impossible without in the same motion confirming the uniqueness of each text, which furthermore *must be distinct from its fellows* in order to feature as a "member" in a given set:

Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging. And not because of an abundant overflowing or a free, anarchic and unclassifiable productivity, but because of the trait of participation itself, because of the effect of the code and of the generic mark. Making genre its mark, a text demarcates itself. (230)

For Derrida, the "mark" that signifies belonging in a group (in this case the group "marked" by a given genre, whether the novel, the short story, or the poem) does so through an active contradiction: in order to "mark" belonging in a group, genre *must* also mark not-belonging. Genre marks how texts are similar but in doing so also marks that they are each separate, distinguishable from one another. (Otherwise they would simply be word-for-word identical texts, which would not constitute a genre but only copies.) There can be no "group," that is, various texts that have some common feature, if those texts

aren't exactly that—various, different, non-identical. Thus, for the “mark” of genre to work it must simultaneously designate both the “mark” and “demarcation” of any given text that “participates” in any given genre.

Like the “slash” that Laurie refers to in the opening pages of *The Arbutus/Madrone Files*, the mark of belonging is also the mark that sets apart. In the case of arbutus/madrone it is a mark that refers to what is held in common by different regions, and how different regions signify the common differently. The slash suggests an attention to the ways in which biology, culture, geography, and politics overlap. In the case of genre, the trick is to recognize the principle of the mark and by doing so recognize that contamination is the law of genre. It can exist precisely because no text is ever “purely” given to a genre. The concept of genre functions only because of the implicit impurity that permits the appearance of the “mark” in the first place. Derrida's observation serves to illuminate much of Laurie's scholarly practice, though in answering the question “how” it does not answer the question “why.” More concretely, it does not begin to think about what value such a practice might have for the real-world, even practical, concerns that Laurie takes up. In the case of the arbutus/madrone, it is important to recognize a similar impurity operating at the level of ecological discourses, where a kind of inclusion simultaneously marks exclusion. Similarly, Laurie's disposition toward teaching betrays the awareness that each student's inclusion in the pedagogical hierarchy as “learners” of a particular field actually both configures and disrupts it with the bodies of knowledge that each student brings to the table.

3. A New, Improved Pollution

As Andrea Campbell has pointed out, the theoretical discourse of which Derrida is seen as a proponent was frequently viewed with hostility by early ecocritical scholars, who felt that in promoting a vision of nature as “constructed” (2) such theorists increased rather than reduced the disconnection between human beings and the natural world. As Campbell writes, “[b]ecause many postmodern literary critics were concerned more with metaphorical nature than with the actual natural realm, ecocritics perceived a widening gap between people and their environment, both in fiction and reality. Such distance could only lead to continued environmental destruction” (2). As a result, first-wave ecocritics felt an urgency to respond to environmental crises whose threat was inadequately addressed by an academic practice that tended toward theoretical abstraction, and that,

however correct it may have been in examining social, political, and environmental problems by addressing the systems of logic and intellectual traditions that eventuated them, retreated from the immediate necessity of devising instrumental responses to material conditions. Laurie himself puts it plain: “Readers and teachers seizing, usually uneasily, on the label ecocriticism, find they cannot or must not—while surrounded by accelerating extinction of species—confine their work to language and a theory of text” (“Botany” 349). The response to the question posed by Laurie’s comment—how to move away from such “confinement,” how to enable “engagement”—can be found in Campbell: “The desire to make the environment more central to literary discussions, to reconnect readers with nature, and to downplay the importance of strictly theoretical discourse, all in the hopes of combating environmental destruction—these characteristics all point to an energized and fresh new way of approaching literature” (5). Both scholarly and pedagogical practice must go beyond both the printed page and the ivory tower classroom and engage—as Laurie asks his students to do—with the material conditions of ecological crisis. This engagement then feeds back into scholarship and teaching to enable the transmission of ideas and lessons gained. Part of this transmission is a writing that forces, in radical play, an active rather than passive reading that corresponds with the necessity for engagement, a willingness to embrace impurity, or, to put it another way, “getting your hands dirty”—equally on the level of text, classroom, scholarly practice, work in the field—in order to unite the theoretical with the practical.

It seems odd to argue for contamination in ecocritical practice, even as a metaphor, since so much of that practice is directed toward the negative effects of instrumental reasoning within the natural world. Yet there is a way to think of pollution not as a reduction of the world to the same—a poisoned, uninhabitable landscape—but as the process whereby the world is rejuvenated and transformed. This is, in part, what Laurie’s essay on “The Botany of the Liar” was about, and also the focus of his more recent interest in invader species. Anthony Lioi, in his article, “Of Swamp Dragons: Mud, Megalopolis, and a Future for Ecocriticism” argues for the necessity of affirming pollution in “the cosmic order”: “To affirm dirt is to recognize that impurity is inevitable, and to offer it a carefully defined place that recognizes and contains its power. To reject dirt is to imagine that it can be separated from what is sacred, and to finalize that separation by annihilating pollution from the cosmic order itself” (17). Part of Lioi’s project is reclaiming the urban site as a

place of ecocritical focus, just as much as the “untainted” nature (if such a thing even exists) beyond its limits. For me, his argument bears upon the very pressing issue of dealing with pollution itself in ecocritical writing to recognize its important role in the cycle of renewal and transformation (obviously, by pollution I’m not talking about industrial effluent). This demands a form of writing that reflects a self-consciousness regarding generic pollution or, more to the point, disrupts texts that fail to. I want to reclaim “pollution” in the course of devising a critical methodology that fuses genre theory with ecocriticism. For what is the work of post-structuralism if not the call for a disposition rather than a prescription, a willingness to let pre-emptive systems lapse into their own contradictions, and by keeping a view on that process to create a possibility for agency? What is important here is attending upon possibility rather than maintaining ideologies that “read” the world only within the narrow confines of a particular belief-system and ignore or rewrite evidence that does not serve such ideologies’ aims and goals. The kind of pollution Derrida witnesses in genre, then, not only recognizes the failure of systematic approaches to text, but also systems in general. That recognition offers an attitude that celebrates the proliferation of possibilities, even contradiction, which can lead to a more immediate relationship between text and practice. Laurie himself suggests as much in the need for a continual awareness of the “otherness” of the plant world beyond systematic rendering when he writes that “[t]he inevitability of language also poses a challenge and suggests a possibility: botanics acknowledges *other*, will test the *gap* as a basis of discovery, as it is the basis of metaphor . . . Admitting to that limitation will be a beginning” (“Botany” 350, italics in original). One way to highlight the “challenge” posed by “the inevitability of language” is to mix the text, pollute it, and keep this in continual view of the reader so that the “gaps” between various systems of knowledge, various kinds of language, various methods of engagement, become ever more apparent. In doing so the reader is asked to embark on a journey whose generic map he or she must continually re-draw along the way.

4. The Importance of Irresponsibility

Laurie opens “Botany of the Liar” with a call to our responsibilities as readers and writers: “I had the title for this piece before I had my abstract. And I had my abstract before my example. The lure of a trip to Paris in April can play havoc with scholarly responsibility” (“Botany” 350). The coincidental nature of much scholarship, of its meandering, is here openly acknowledged.

Frankly, I couldn't resist the lure to Paris in April either, and had to come up with a paper in order to go, but unlike Laurie I never admitted it, and so a link between context and text was lost. I'm recovering it here, where the interjection of the personal into the academic acknowledges the critical relationship between *what* one writes and *where* one writes from, or, perhaps more appropriately, what *makes* one write, and to what end.¹

My title, "The Writing of Trespass," is my way of trying to observe in Laurie's work what ecocritics have seen as the importance of developing a kind of writing that does not allow generic presuppositions, the way we organize language and thus knowledge, to supervene on our relationship with the natural world. As Rebecca Raglon and Marian Scholtmeijer observe, in "Heading Off the Trail: Language, Literature, and Nature's Resistance to Narrative," the aim of their ecocritical examination of literature is "to gesture toward the rediscovery of a powerful natural world, one that resists our narratives . . . tak[ing] the position that literature not only imposes categories on the natural world but can also be a flexible and vibrant agent of change" (248-49). This notion of literature as "imposing categories" on the world is articulated by John Frow when he argues that "genres create effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility, which are central to the different ways the world is understood in the writing of history or of philosophy or of science, or in painting, or in everyday talk" (2). Elsewhere he goes further in saying that genres are "highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning" (10). By "constraining" in a "highly organised" fashion what we produce and interpret as meaning, they also constrain what we *do*. Genres impose particular ways of organizing language and thus preemptively sort the essential from the non-essential—determining what is and isn't valid evidence even before the case is made—and since genres are historical artifacts created and shaped over time they are not necessarily derived from contemporary concerns or events in the world, but rather brought to bear upon them, in some instances from considerable remove. Raglon and Scholtmeijer discuss exactly this:

Accompanying this preoccupation with language is a sociological strain of criticism that concentrates on language's culpability in creating categories that are in turn responsible for a variety of social and environmental ills [. . .] Because language and literature direct our perceptions, they are guilty participants in the destruction of the world. (248)

However, while Raglon and Scholtmeijer open with this dark vision of genre in shaping perception, it is really the opposite notion that they are trying to

defend in the course of their argument when they suggest that “the best literature is simultaneously at work forming countervailing gestures that frustrate the inclination to be content with common expectations and complacency” (249). Raglon and Scholtmeijer offer a kind of writing that I am also seeing in Laurie’s work, one “that gives expression to nature [that does] not fit neatly defined genres nor follow along narrative trails human desires have laid down for the order and control of nature” (252). Note the importance here of “human desires,” an egocentric and narcissistic humanism that seeks to understand and control the world, usually in line with instrumental purposes that benefit, in a one-way manner, immediate social priorities. Raglon and Scholtmeijer advocate for a writing that “alludes to a natural order that exists apart from human control” (253), exemplifying this through literary works, those of Nadine Gordimer, Russell Hoban, and Franz Kafka. Similarly, I trace how Laurie’s writing is also one that, in mixing genres, in making various bits of writing “trespass” on each other’s areas of expertise, also moves away from the “trails human desires have laid down.” To put it in the words of Chaia Heller, in *Ecology of Everyday Life: Rethinking the Desire for Nature*, Laurie is interested in “desire as a yearning to enhance a social whole greater than our selves, a desire to enrich the larger community . . . a yearning to be part of a greater collectivity that will challenge the structure of society to create a cooperative and ecological world” (5).

Like Heller, Laurie focuses on sustaining community in the face of ecological catastrophe, and nowhere is this focus clearer than in the many genres that testify to the various folkways involved in a given region. In viewing the various paths Laurie asks us to cross we become aware of just how many different ways we might interact with the environment, and also the paths it carves in us. In “Botany of the Liar,” for instance, Laurie brings the personal essay into the space of scholarship to disrupt expectations and pre-emptive readings. Rather than privileging individual “desire”—evident in Laurie’s remark that he decided to go to Paris before he figured out what kind of paper he’d give at the conference—this essay exposes what scholarship often tries to deny: the whimsical impulses out of which knowledge is sometimes born, and how often scholarly writing serves ends other than that of “disinterested inquiry.” To put it another way, the Tropes and Territories conference ended up using Laurie as its medium as much as he used it. In this case, the stakes were low, a trip to Paris, but in others the “true ends” are exceedingly high, despite being invisible. That Laurie accomplishes this self-awareness with irony and self-deprecation in no way undermines the seriousness of his project.

5. In the Fields

To further illustrate Laurie's play with genre I'm going to turn to one particular text that continues to intrigue me, and which is never far off when I'm thinking of correctives to my own critical practice, particularly the way such practice can also become in thrall to its own conventions at the expense of the world it is trying to engage. This text is Laurie's *A Field Guide to "A Guide to Dungeness Spit"* that I swindled him out of by trading it for my first novel (best left unmentioned) in 1998. *Field Guide* is on the surface a reading of American poet, David Wagoner's poem, "A Guide to Dungeness Spit," though it is hardly a traditional scholarship, comprising instead a series of fragments devoted not only to the poem but to the region about which the poem is written, including excerpts from local legends and history, tourist brochures, personal observations, scholarship and criticism. I remember being perplexed when I first opened *Field Guide*. It opened with a photograph—no commentary—then a poem—no commentary—then another photograph—no commentary—then a long quotation. By this point I was spellbound and exasperated, looking if not for a directly stated thesis then at least the associative logic that held it all together, and, in the process, starting to make those associations myself. It wasn't until page nineteen that I got (or so I think) an actual text written by Laurie, which ended with the following: "How can we best read these instructions? First, read the 'field' of Dungeness Spit. Pause there, and listen to the echoes of local knowledge. If we cross from field to guide, stop, and overturn the poem. The best plan is to alternate routes" (19). I recall pausing here and thinking, "Instructions?" and then, "Knowledge?" and then, "Plan?" Here, there was only a collage of information, and things didn't start clicking until a few pages later, where the text, quoting Wagoner, says, "Something in us resists a guide" (22), which brought the question of my own resistance to the fore, and made me realize that apart from considering what the signposts were, or *should have been*, pointing toward, I was also being asked to consider the action of signposting itself—the word, the placement of the word against others, the reaction it gives rise to. Bradley puts it more succinctly in describing Laurie's work as an examination of how "the experience of reading and the reading of experience are intertwined and [how] interpretation and evaluation are shaped by this entanglement" (119). Again, Laurie involves us in another "slash" to suggest the separation and interconnection of activity—reading/writing; exploration/interpretation; scholarship/fieldwork. We are not just reading a text but are also experiencing the interaction with the world that

produced it, and, in this way, are called upon to undertake that interaction ourselves. In other words, *Field Guide* doesn't truly begin to mean what it says until we are no longer reading what it says, but have embarked upon our own experience of signposting, looking not just at the world but at our own ways of looking.

Bradley's statement on the reading position echoes Frow's earlier contention, that "genres create effects of reality and truth" (2). Both Bradley and Frow point out how scholarship—in which knowledge is a function of thesis, research, support, and follow-through—is disrupted by Laurie to illuminate how that genre has structured a certain world view. Maybe there is no point in having a thesis. Maybe it's too partial an experience. Maybe a conclusion is a delusion. Maybe "research" and "support" are themselves chimeras dreamed into being by the questions asked. I don't think Laurie means to make us stop having theses, undertaking research, or arriving at conclusions, but he certainly wants us to reflect on how they guide our activities. This is not to say that all the world is a text; it is rather to say that the minute the world becomes text we need to get back out into it and see what kind of effect our texts have had on it. Along the way, Laurie asks us what we might gain not just by critiquing such structures—which is what much of critical theory does—but also by repurposing them, and thereby arriving at different ways of negotiating reality. Another way to think about the techniques in *Field Guide* is that, by disrupting expectations around scholarship, Laurie's work asks us to rethink the relationship between *what* we're guided through and *how* we're guided through it, or as Bradley says, to see the *what* in the *how* and the *how* in the *what*. As Raglon and Scholtmeijer argue, a text such as *Field Guide* wanders off the path prepared for it by the genre of the scholarly essay, and ends up trespassing on a number of others, so that genre itself becomes one of the signposts it asks us to consider.

From the beginning, then, Laurie draws our attention to the differences between modes of writing. By giving us Wagoner's poem whole, without immediate commentary, by bringing in notes, tourist brochures, news items, scientific data, without embedding any of these, by way of standard quotation, into the flow of scholarship itself, the action of genre comes into focus. This forces us to think through a host of connections that are adjacent, incommensurable, and each a part of the siloed thinking that is, especially for those invested in ecocriticism, very much a part of our environmental crisis, where business doesn't speak to environmentalism, where mass media does not speak to the more marginal discursive communities of

poets, laborers, Indigenous peoples, and so on. To “speak” in this sense is more than simply to bridge a communication gap, but is rather to be part of a larger systemic problem in which certain modes of discourse have more privilege, and thus power and authority, than others. It is also about the ways in which rhetorical strategies mask, obscure, and exploit these differences, and the necessity of exposing how and why. The language of economics for instance—immediate job creation, natural resources as part of the GDP, the fiscal benefits of profit versus sustainability—is privileged over the anecdotal evidence for the erosion of lifeways, the despoiling of geography, the disappearance of species, never mind the poetics of place, that Laurie explores. That one kind of “genre” carries more weight socially and politically over others derided as marginal, unscientific, literary, has serious consequences, precisely because they contain rebuttals not so much to content but to the world view embodied in a purely economic vision.

As Hans Robert Jauss has argued, in response to the work of Rudolf Bultmann, genre is as much about “community” (136) as text itself: “Literary forms and genres are thus neither subjective creations of the author, nor merely retrospective ordering-concepts, but rather primarily social phenomena, which means that they depend on functions in the lived world” (135). These “functions” are tied to the communities for whom the works are written and to whom they provide guidance. Thus, trespassing on the various “territories” of genre is also to trespass on reading communities, and in doing so draw them into the same conversation, to *force* them to be part of it, which, as Heller has argued, is a necessity for reengaging with the environment as a collective concern. I believe this is why Laurie objected so strenuously to the term “intradiegetic” at the WLA conference years ago. According to an entry posted on Wikispaces, “an intradiegetic narrator tells a story on the narrative level of the characters, the diegetic level, which describes how the characters of a story communicate with each other and which is embedded in the extradiegetic level (see below)” (“Intradiegetic” n. pag.). It is not the study of narrative Laurie objected to, nor even the intellectual rigor embodied in this almost scientific taxonomy, but rather the way in which such definitions are couched, speaking to a scholarly in-group, when Laurie’s work is about bridging discursive communities. Does this kind of language prevent that kind of access? That’s a larger question Michel de Certeau has taken up in considering how institutions generate their own specialized vocabulary to guarantee their places of power, creating sites of knowledge open only to those who know the code (8-9), whereas Laurie’s work has always been about

the risks of powerlessness—understood here as an abandoning of both specialist expertise and authority—and of opening the doors to the language of others. Similar to Derrida writing about genre, De Certeau uses the word “law” to designate these areas of specialist knowledge, since they operate by enforcing generic rules around what can and cannot be spoken, and how. De Certeau describes this “law of . . . place” (29) as one

that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as the base from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed. [. . .] Every “strategic” rationalization seeks first of all to distinguish its “own” place, that is, the place of its own power and will, from an “environment.” . . . It is also the typical attitude of modern science, politics, and military strategy. (36)

For De Certeau “place” is less geo-spatial than an enclosure of discourse, specific terms and arguments and methodologies whose mastery distinguishes the expert from the “layman.” These “places” are then various fields of knowing that first consolidate power in the form of expertise—“its *own place*”—and then exchange this expertise for authority in the world—the “environment” from which it is “distinguished”—which becomes instrumentally subject to the objectives of that expertise (whether in the form of research study, military action, or commercial interests) (7-8). In this sense, my use of the word “trespass” is meant to suggest the introduction of “illegal” bodies of knowledge into the “places” of such discourse, those not permitted a voice within the conventions governing them. This serves to contest and destabilize authority to suggest that expertise is frequently a mastery of a particular discourse rather than knowledge of the world. In other words, their application constrains rather than reveals the “environment” from which they are fatally isolated. Instead of remaining in the refuge (social rather than environmental) of a literary specialty, Laurie is not only willing to stray onto the territory of other fields, those he might not be an “expert” in, but to acknowledge this kind of trespass for what it is, a willingness to attend upon other modes of discourse, to bring them into conversation with his own without subordinating one to the other, and thereby revealing their limitations. This is evident not only in his writing, but his teaching as well, where students are encouraged to step out of the classroom, to take risks, to move beyond the security of a specific competence, and in doing so, as all trespassers do, to question the very notion of the proprietary itself, especially as it extends from a body of knowledge to the parts of the world that body of knowledge speaks for. In

risking his own proprietorship, he makes others risk their own so as not to obscure the world but to experience it.

What is suggested in *Field Guide*, then, is that the hermeticism of genre—the hermeticism readers expect from it, consciously or otherwise—engenders a hermeticism of approaches to the world that, sealed in their own manners of language, fail to account for how partial (in both senses of the term) their practices are, and therefore how far-reaching the consequences. To trespass on various modes of writing, to insert one mode of discourse into the territory of another, is not only to disrupt the law of genre, but also to address the ideological containment of specific communities, reengaging them with the environment (in the larger sense) whose multiplicity they try to corral and manage. Laurie's signposts don't lead us on, they lead us to think about the spaces between, spaces where the boundary of one sign system mixes with another in ways that have very real effects on those travelling by their guidance. It's an approach that has a lot to teach us about our critical practices, about how our signposts might speak to each other, effectively mixing their signals, and about the vantages and routes we leave out.

6. Conclusion

But where does that leave us? I don't think Laurie's point is a paranoid hyper-awareness, or a micro-managed trip along Dungeness Spit. This is the primary difference between where his work begins and much of critical theory ends. Where certain theories, Derrida's for example, might tell us what is irreconcilable in thinking, the main part of their instruction is a wariness of instruction. They are not so good at helping us proceed. Laurie's work, by contrast, doesn't exhibit such wariness. It's less a question of suspicion than of an expanded capacity, a belief in the idea that education can augment wariness in ways that lead to more fulfilling accommodation with whatever is before us—Dungeness Spit, Arbutus/Madrona trees, salal, poetry, region. An alternative way to educate ourselves, outside of prescriptive modes, is to be open to precisely that mixing of signals Laurie's work does so well. By letting various forms of discourse play off one another we have a way of continually renegotiating that accommodation, of not becoming mired in one particular vision, permitting the disrupting effect not only of new information but new ways of conveying it. I've put the "ing" on that word "renegotiate" since it's an ongoing process Laurie reminds us of, not some decisive position. The absence of a standard through-line in the work means there's always room to connect the linkages again, more

strongly, differently, or even to see in them a disconnect that might be additionally enlightening. This will all the while help keep in mind the actual place that guides (but is distinct from) the text as much as the text guides it.

There's a necessary humor to all this, a willingness not to take things so seriously, which has, paradoxically, a very serious effect, namely, changing our dispositions. This is evident in some of the fantastical anecdotes in *Field Guide*, such as the story related by George Hansen of the man who, despite warnings, disturbed the bodies of buried Chinese migrants and was killed for his transgression (60), or of the "Dunge Ness Monster" (70-71). I don't think these anecdotes are—and I'm anticipating standard critical responses here—pandering to cheap exoticism, or mere entertainment. Or maybe that is exactly what they are, and that is why they are so significant. They remind us of what is always in excess of political and social utility, and probably why life continues to be worth living. Disposition is, I think, the most underrated of attributes, and one—amidst our attacks on corporate malfeasance, governmental lapse, historical trauma—we lose sight of. Laurie's work expresses the realist position that we can't sit still, paralyzed by trying to sort all we cannot know, but also the idealist notion that we must remain open to knowledge, even in a utopian sense, while undertaking our inevitable choices. The words he uses to describe Wagoner's work are apt for his own: a "beacon . . . flashing its caution and guidance to all who are navigating their lives" (61). Given how *A Field Guide* is written, I think this "caution" is also directed at our attitude toward the "guidance" that the same book offers, even as we set out with it in hand. It's no surprise that the text ends not on Laurie's words, but on those of others, reminding us of the greater importance of listening, of looking out.

NOTE

- 1 Such a writing project is not exclusive to ecocriticism. Much groundbreaking early feminist writing proposed exactly this kind of writing strategy, bringing the personal to the political in order to illuminate the effect of institutional power (in this case patriarchal) on daily life. Genre was one of the scenes in which this power manifested, as suggested by Mary Gerhart in *Genre Choices, Genre Questions*: "The generic reader . . . is not only a reader theoretically capable of reading every text: the generic reader is also the reader inscribed in specific kinds of texts" (168). Gerhart identifies a problematic similar to the one I am discussing above, though in her case it's one concerned with the interaction between genre and gendered subjectivity.

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