

## ***Textes et contextes***

ISSN : 1961-991X

: Université Bourgogne Europe

16-1 | 2021

Réenchanter le sauvage urbain

# Wild (in the) City: Challenging Human Exceptionalism in Rick Bass's and Barry Lopez's Short Stories

Article publié le 15 juillet 2021.

**Claire Cazajous-Augé**

🔗 <http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=3047>

Le texte seul, hors citations, est utilisable sous [Licence CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Les autres éléments (illustrations, fichiers annexes importés) sont susceptibles d'être soumis à des autorisations d'usage spécifiques.

Claire Cazajous-Augé, « Wild (in the) City: Challenging Human Exceptionalism in Rick Bass's and Barry Lopez's Short Stories », *Textes et contextes* [], 16-1 | 2021, publié le 15 juillet 2021 et consulté le 17 juin 2026. Droits d'auteur : Le texte seul, hors citations, est utilisable sous [Licence CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Les autres éléments (illustrations, fichiers annexes importés) sont susceptibles d'être soumis à des autorisations d'usage spécifiques.. URL : <http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=3047>

La revue *Textes et contextes* autorise et encourage le dépôt de ce pdf dans des archives ouvertes.

# PREO

PREO est une plateforme de diffusion [voie diamant](#).

# Wild (in the) City: Challenging Human Exceptionalism in Rick Bass’s and Barry Lopez’s Short Stories

## **Textes et contextes**

Article publié le 15 juillet 2021.

16-1 | 2021

Réenchanter le sauvage urbain

Claire Cazajous-Augé

🔗 <http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=3047>

Le texte seul, hors citations, est utilisable sous [Licence CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Les autres éléments (illustrations, fichiers annexes importés) sont susceptibles d’être soumis à des autorisations d’usage spécifiques.

---

### Introduction

1. The threat of urbanization
  - 1.1. Time of innocence
  - 1.2. Creating animal sanctuaries
2. A subtle presence
  - 2.1. Traces of nonhuman animals
  - 2.2. A new practice of cities
3. Writing to re-enchant the city
  - 3.1. Artists as predators
  - 3.2. Writing to reconnect

### Conclusion

---

## Introduction

- 1 In *Uncommon Ground*, William Cronon explains that the wilderness is not natural; it is a social construct: “It is not a pristine sanctuary [...]. Instead, it’s a product of [...] civilization, and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made.” (Cronon 1996: 69) Wild territories have become anthropized, and cannot rightfully be called “wild” anymore. Cronon goes as far as saying that the wilderness is an

Le texte seul, hors citations, est utilisable sous Licence CC BY 4.0. Les autres éléments (illustrations, fichiers annexes importés) sont susceptibles d’être soumis à des autorisations d’usage spécifiques.

unfair and dangerous illusion: "Wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural." (Cronon 1996: 69) According to Cronon, protecting certain symbolic places of the wilderness such as national parks leads to an absurd and counter-productive hierarchy between such spaces. In other words, if we concentrate our efforts of preservation on the territories we consider the wildest, we might neglect the degradation of more ordinary places where nonhuman nature can be found. Cronon thus encourages us to see that wildness can be found around us, and not only in remote places:

What I celebrate about such places is not just their wildness, though that certainly is among their most important qualities; what I celebrate even more is that they remind us of the wildness in our own backyards, of the nature that is all around us if only we have eyes to see it. (Cronon 1996: 86)

- 2 The two contemporary American eco-writers Rick Bass and Barry Lopez use their writings as weapons to change our perspectives on the nonhuman world and on the relationships we develop with it. Indeed, Bass has written essays to protect what he considers the last wild areas of the United States, to save the population of grizzlies in the mountains of Colorado and to reintegrate wolves in Montana. In his texts, Lopez defends the pristine dimension of the Arctic or warns us on the dwindling number of wolves. Their nonfiction books thus generally deal with isolated places which seem untouched and unaffected by human activity. Similarly, most of their short stories take place in remote valleys, arid deserts, or mountains and often tell the stories of the relationships humans and nonhuman beings develop. And yet, encounters between humans and the nonhuman animals which inhabit such areas are not limited to the wilderness. Bass's and Lopez's narrators and characters also observe them or interact with them in urban or suburban areas: black bears roam in an abandoned lot, migrating herons fly above Manhattan, toads and tadpoles swarm in a swamp on the outskirts of Houston. Encountering animals that usually live far from humans in a busy street or in a backyard disrupts the idea that cities are unnatural spaces or exclusively human territories and challenge our definition of the wild. As William Cronon asser-

ted, they show us that wildness is also part of urban daily life, if only we take the time to look around us.

- 3 This presentation will analyze the role of the short stories set in urban areas in the eco-activist projects of Rick Bass and Barry Lopez. It will more precisely consider the manners in which displacing the motif of the encounter between the human and the nonhuman worlds from remote areas to urban or suburban spaces contributes to helping them raise our environmental awareness. I shall first consider how urbanization is presented as a threat to nonhuman nature in “Swamp Boy” (*In the Loyal Mountains*) and in “Mexico” (*The Watch*). In these two short stories by Rick Bass, the unregulated expansion of urban areas illustrates man’s hubris and prevents any form of coexistence between the human and the nonhuman worlds. I shall then examine how Barry Lopez’s narrators adopt a more optimistic approach in “Winter Herons” (*Winter Count*) and in “The Open Lot.” (*Field Notes*) They show that harmonious naturecultures can take place even in the largest city in the United States. Far from exemplifying a sense of division between nature and culture, or between the domestic and the wild, Lopez’s stories set in New York City display the subtle yet essential presence of nonhuman beings in urban areas. This will lead me to explore the ways in which poetic writing teaches us how to adopt a biocentric look on urban and suburban environments. By relying on narrative and rhythmic devices that take into account the agency of nonhuman animals, Bass and Lopez represent fruitful interspecies cooperation in what could be at first considered as exclusively human constructions.

## 1. The threat of urbanization

### 1.1. Time of innocence

- 4 “Swamp Boy” explores the harm humans have done to nonhuman nature by expanding cities. The narrator reminisces his childhood’s landscapes, which have been swallowed by the buildings and the streets of Houston, Texas. The descriptions of the bayou he used to pass by every day and of its ecosystem take on an elegiac tone. The narrator, who seems to be the eponymous young hero himself, suggests that when he was a child, living in a city and having a connec-

tion with nonhuman nature were not contradictory. The bayou was an Edenic place in which he could experience a sense of connection with the nonhuman world, even though he grew up in the suburbs of a dense city. The bayou gave him the opportunity to observe and study a rich fauna—the place was “writhing with life” (Bass 1995: 30). The large array of verbs of perception shows that he developed a deeply sensorial relation with nature—“he tasted their tart juices” (Bass 1995: 21); “There was a salty, stinging feeling of thorny scratches across the back of my hands and forearms” (Bass 1995: 24); “[He] walked the rest of the way home barefoot” (Bass 1995: 31)—and the comparison “his face scrunched up like an owl’s” (Bass 1995: 21) discloses his proximity with the fauna of the bayou. However, this representation of a connection between children and the nonhuman world can be nuanced. Indeed, at that time, the bayou was already being swallowed by the reckless development of the city: “Swamp Boy could feel these things as he moved across the prairie and through the woods, there at the edge of that throbbing, expanding city, Houston.” (Bass 1995: 26) The narrator then contemplates the destruction of the bayou from the tall glass building where he works as a publicist:

Those woods are long gone now, buried by so many tons of houses and roads and other sheer masses of concrete that what happened there when I was a child might as well have occurred four or five centuries ago, might just as well have been played out by Vikings in horn helmets or red natives in loincloths. (Bass 1995: 25)

- 5 The metaphor of the city as a graveyard betrays the narrator's pessimism about man's ability to preserve the nonhuman world and to live with it. The rich and diverse fauna and flora have given way to tar and cement. The destruction of the woods and the loss of wildlife happened so fast that the narrator feels as if his childhood had taken place in a completely different era, as suggested by the exaggeration “four or five centuries ago.” At the level of the sentence, this temporal distortion is also recreated with an anaphora—“might as well.” The difference between Swamp Boy's and the narrator's postures partakes of this idea that many humans have lost their connection with nonhuman nature. Significantly enough, the young boy physically engages with the woods—“He crouched down, concentrating, looking

out over the lake and those places where the breeze had made a little ring or ripple” (Bass 1995: 30)—whereas the narrator overlooks the ocean from a high building—“I work in advertising now, at the top of a steel-and-glass skyscraper from which I stare out at the flat gulf coast” (Bass 1995: 25); “I’m so high up that I can see to the curve of the earth and beyond.” (Bass 1995: 25) With a dominant position and an overlooking gaze, the narrator embodies human hubris, which has separated humans from the rest of the natural world. “Swamp Boy” epitomizes Bruno Latour’s concept of “the Great Divide,” a two-part vision of the world which opposes Nature and Culture, by means of a rather dualistic perspective in which childhood is presented as an almost idyllic time of communion with nature and adulthood the moment when we participate in the destruction of the nonhuman world. With an elegiac tone, the narrator intimates that Capitalism is to blame for this separation between the human and the nonhuman worlds. He believes that the problem does not come from not human activity, suggesting that, like other peoples, Vikings and Native Americans used to coexist with nonhuman nature; it is Capitalism, our dominant mode of production that seeks to maximize profits and considers nature as a mere resource, that has led to the environmental crisis and has disconnected us from nature (Malm 2016). Houston and, more generally, cities, emblemize a monstrous Capitalism that has devoured the last wild areas of the United-States and it seems that there is little hope that humans will be able to reconnect with nonhuman nature other than by reminiscing their childhood memories.

## 1.2. Creating animal sanctuaries

- 6 Bass’s characters nevertheless try to reintroduce some species of nonhuman animals, specifically species that are believed to be dangerous to human beings, in urban environments. In “Mexico,” the narrator and his best friend, Kirby, live in an affluent neighborhood of Houston. Kirby keeps Shack, a twenty-three-pound bass that almost never appears at the surface, in his swimming pool. The invisible yet threatening presence of the fish marks out an area reserved for non-human beings in a suburban environment. In other words, the pool seems to function as an animal sanctuary and, as such, turns into an area that it both to be protected and to be feared. On the one hand,

the pool protects Shack, which embodies the last remnants of a wild America that the expansion of suburban areas threatens, from civilization. Significantly enough, Kirby patrols around the pool to prevent the fish from being hurt by neighbors. On the other hand, the pool protects Kirby's wife and her friends from Shack. Indeed, they do not dare go into the pool for fear the fish might attack them: "They've never seen the fish. It's just the idea, something big being down there below them that they can't see, that frightens them." (Bass 1989: 14) Keeping the giant bass in the swimming pool hints at the necessity to preserve a sense of wildness in a greedy society—the story takes place in the 1980s, when the petroleum industry was booming in Texas. Like Thoreau before him, the narrator of "Mexico" engages us into thinking that the wild cannot only be found in the wilderness: "The Thoreauvian wild relocated the regenerative life principle from a remote place lost its primal origins to an ongoing process occurring underfoot. Nature is not elsewhere, but everywhere, and all the land is holy, not just a few best places." (Dassow date: 24) However, Thoreau shows that wild nature is already present in one's backyards, whereas Bass suggests that humans have to incorporate it in sanctuary-like spaces. Rather than reconnecting humans with the nonhuman world, the artificial cohabitation that Kirby has initiated deepens their separation.

## 2. A subtle presence

### 2.1. Traces of nonhuman animals

- 7 In "Winter Herons" and in "The Open Lot," two of Barry Lopez's stories, the ecology of New York City shows that, far from being a place that illustrates human exceptionalism, the city is a place where the lives of humans and of nonhuman animals which live far from urban spaces overlap, even temporarily. However, the entanglements that may occur between the human and the nonhuman worlds do not always appear in the open. They develop subtly, in urban interstices or in the pedestrians' discreet expressions and gestures.
- 8 In "Winter Herons", the narrator questions the legitimacy of the division between urban environments and nonhuman areas by showing that cities bear the influence of the nonhuman world. The unnamed

main character of the story, who comes from Montana, is visiting his girlfriend in Manhattan. As he is waiting for her, he observes the hustle and bustle of city life, which evokes nonhuman nature. The cityscape reminds him of a narrow valley—"the canyon of the wide avenue disappeared into darkness" (Lopez 1999: 24)—and the gestures, the movements and the faces of city dwellers seem to him like those of nonhuman animals:

In the faces that moved past him now, over the purling of footsteps, he saw distortion, greed, subterfuge—predatory expressions; but more often he saw veiled faces, passing quick as sparrows or deer, unrevealed. [...] Then the fandango of bright skirts and trousers parted, like a sudden upwelling of wood ducks, and the shadow of him rung on the sidewalk like the gnomes of a sundial. (Lopez 1999: 18)

- 9 In these two excerpts, the use of a metaphor—"the canyon of the wide avenue"—and of comparisons—"passing quick as sparrows or deer"; "like a sudden upwelling of wood ducks"—first recalls that nonhuman nature is the main character's frame of reference. Buildings and people are seen through the lens of a man who has always lived in a remote area and only occasionally comes to the city. More generally, such images suggest that, in spite of their technical skills and their modern lives far from the woods, the deserts and the mountains, humans are not completely disconnected from nonhuman nature. In this story, the streets of New York reproduce the architecture of nature, and city dwellers move and walk like nonhuman animals. The ways animals move or behave have influenced the manners in which humans inhabit the world, even if they do not interact with them. As for them, nonhuman animals arguably ignore the separations established by humans, and their presence in Manhattan invites us to be humbler. Indeed, the immemorial migrating routes have not been displaced when cities have been built, and the character observes herons landing in the middle of New York City. No one notices the exceptional and almost ethereal event but the character. Life in the city continues, oblivious to the unexpected appearance of these great blue herons:

He had walked only a few blocks when he realized that birds were falling. Great blue herons were descending slowly against the braking

of their wings, their ebony legs extended to test the depth of the snow which lay in a garden that divided the avenue. He stood transfixed as the birds settled. They folded their wings and began to mill in the gently falling snow and the pale light. They had landed as if on a prairie, and if they made any sound he did not hear. One pushed its long bill into the white ground. After a moment they were all still. They gazed at the front of a hotel, where someone had just gone, through a revolving door. A cab slowed in front of him—he shook his head, no, no, and it went on. One or two of the birds flared their wings to lay off the snow and a flapping suddenly erupted among them and they were in the air again. Fifteen or twenty, flying past with heavy, hushing beats, north up the avenue for two or three blocks before they broke through the plane of light and disappeared. (Lopez 1999: 24)

- 10 At first, the herons seem precautious—“descending slowly”; “if they made any sound he did not hear”; “they were all still” —but they become less careful as they fly away—“a flapping suddenly erupted among them”; “heavy, hushing beats.” For migrating birds, which often stop in unfamiliar places, discretion is a matter of survival. The narrator does not only describe the herons’ movements; he also imagines how they perceive the city. The use of the conjunctive phrase “as if” betrays his humble attitude when trying to interpret the animals’ behaviors and to guess what the avenue might look like to them: the city is a migratory path, the avenue functions as a wildlife corridor, and the city becomes a prairie. The phrase “as if” acts as a translation tool or a hypothesis more than as an explanation. Thomas Pughe explains that this expression, far from testifying to the narrator’s anthropocentric gaze, highlights the connections between the human and the nonhuman worlds (Pughe 2013 258). In other words, the narrator does not pretend that he can penetrate the herons’ thoughts; he expresses his will to understand the animals’ behaviors by means of writing devices which attempt to create a respectful interaction with them.

## 2.2. A new practice of cities

- 11 In an interview he gave to *The Guardian*, Lopez briefly interrupted answering the journalist’s questions to witness a couple of cranes mating. This scene, which he called a “refreshment for the eye,” al-

lowed him to comment on the effects produced by the irruption of certain species of nonhuman animals in a city: “I notice such things even in urban environments because they’re a pleasant contradiction to the hammering urban intensity and headlong progress that defines so much of the city.” (Helmore 2019) Without negating the differences between the human and the nonhuman worlds, Lopez suggests that the nonhuman animals’ specific ways of inhabiting the world invite us to have a different look at the city. However, in Lopez’s stories and, to a certain extent, in Bass’s stories, interspecies interactions that take place in cities do not only happen through sight. In the urban environments depicted by Lopez and by Bass, many nonhuman animals are hidden, or appear only briefly to city dwellers. In order to perceive them, narrators and characters have to rely on other senses. In *The Land’s Wild Music*, Mark Tredinnick intimates that a place is not only about visible or sound entities. There is a whole “community of living things”:

A particular landscape is not only what we see and hear somewhere, however. It includes all the things that escape our notice—nearly everything, in short. A place includes the invisible things gathered somewhere (invisible because, like a bird beyond the next hill or the water moving in the aquifer, it remained out of sight; invisible because, like a microscopic organism, it is too small to make out with the naked eye; invisible because, like the air itself or infrared light, it is imperceptible to our eyes). A place includes, also, silent presences and processes [...]: the rocks and the old lives fossilized within them, patterns of erosion, the memories and beliefs ‘enfolded’ into places by human experiences. (Tredinnick 2005: 15)

- 12 Tredinnick explains that landscapes and soundscapes are the combination of living things that escape our perception and that form subtle and complex “interrelationships” (Tredinnick 2005: 15). These entanglements are also present in cities, but the frenetic rhythm of urban life and the successive layers of the urban fabric have made them silent and invisible. Yet, Lopez’s characters often have the ability to see beyond the surface of things. They know how to perceive the “infra-animality” (Simon 2018) that used to swarm in the interstices of cities, the “worlds [that] are intertwined in ours, and their threads [that] become entangled in our human stories, humans that we know today could not have survived without these particular en-

tanglements, this parasitism, this symbiosis, this dwelling in them by tiny living beings<sup>13</sup> (My translation, Simon 2018). A technician at the Museum of Natural History, Jane Weddell studies fossils and has learnt to picture absent animals. For example, she can see prehistoric species through the shells and rocks she analyses. Her scientific background has taught her that humans are not the only beings that participate in the creation of cities; they are but a mere strata of urban areas: “She was aware not only of the surface of each street but simultaneously, of the tunneling below, which carried water mains and tree roots, like the meandering chambers of gophers.” (Lopez 2004: 38) Jane’s non-anthropocentric look permits her to see that the mineral, the vegetal and the animal worlds are intertwined and form the first invisible layers of the urban fabric. The zoomorphic image “like the meandering chambers of gophers” partakes of this de-centered approach of the city. Indeed, it places animals as the main frame of reference when describing the hidden architecture of the city. Lopez’s writing reveals that being able to see beyond the visible organization of urban areas helps us adopt a biocentric look on urban environments, and contributes to initiating a more inclusive representation and practice of cities.

## 3. Writing to re-enchant the city

### 3.1. Artists as predators

- 13 In Bass’s and Lopez’s stories, large mammals, migrating birds and many other nonhuman animals live far from cities, or have died because of the expanding presence of human beings. Their overwhelming absence develops the characters’ environmental awareness and their wish to protect nonhuman nature. In “Winter Herons,” the main character meets a choreographer and tells him about the dances of grebes. However, he quickly senses that the artist might be a predator and could use the birds’ mating rituals to film and choreograph them: “[he] hated himself for having given grebes to the man.” (Lopez 1999: 22) The feeling of guilt that the character experiences intimates that he is aware that humans have overexploited nature for their own benefits, and that the nonhuman world ought to be preserved. Simil-

arly, in "Swamp Boy," the narrator prefers not to disclose the secrets of nonhuman nature in his business:

I know some things about the woods, even though I live in the city, have never left this city. I know some things that I learned as a child just by watching and listening—and I could use those things in my advertising, but I don't. They are my secrets. I don't give them away. (Bass 1995: 27)

- 14 These two attitudes could be interpreted as self-reflexive comments on the way artists represent nonhuman nature. Artistic creation, whether it is dancing, writing and, to a certain extent, advertising, approximates to a form of exploitation of the nonhuman world. Environmental writers, Yves-Charles Grandjeat remarks, consider that writing nonhuman nature may amount to taking advantage of it: "It can also be argued that certain modes of representation constitute a form of (symbolic) exploitation, of submission of the natural world to the (even artistic) interests of man.<sup>29</sup>" (My translation, Grandjeat 2005: 20) Just like their narrators and their characters who keep quiet about the beauty of nonhuman nature, Bass and Lopez choose not to write exhaustive descriptions of the nonhuman, but rather to develop a poetics of elusiveness and fragmentation. They often rely on ellipses, metonymies or incomplete portraits that show their will to resist the drive to appropriate nonhuman beings. For example, in "Mexico," the bass that Kirby protects by hiding her in his pool is represented in absentia. Her presence is indicated by a few splashes of color and by the disappearance of her preys: "Rarely does she come to the surface. Just a bolt of movement, green far below and large, and then back she goes, into the car: a fish is gone, a shiner, a minnow; a sloppy, lazy perch." (Bass 1989: 30) It is only when she has been killed by children that her body is finally described: "We stopped, gasping, when we got to the stringer of mostly deadly fish. Shack was on it. A few of them, Shack included, were flopping weakly." (Bass 1989: 32) It is as if exposing and representing an elusive animal amounted to killing it.

## 3.2. Writing to reconnect

15 In *Becoming Animal*, David Abram investigates the ways in which language helps us relate to other beings, and especially to nonhuman animals. Language does not separate us from the rest of the natural world; it is a way to converse with it: “Language’s primary gift is [...] to call ourselves into the vital presence of that world—and into deep and attentive presence with one another.” (Abram 2011: 11) Language, Abram recalls, is first and foremost a physical act, as words are air-born. Because poetic language has kept the rhythmic dimension of verbal communication, it enables us to “sing oneself into contact with others and with the cosmos” (Abram 2011: 11) and to remember that we belong to a “wild community of dynamically intertwined yet weirdly different lives.” (Abram 2011: 42) The substance of words contributes to reminding us that we are natural beings—even if we are city dwellers—tuned into the rhythms of the other animals. “The Open Lot” illustrates the manners in which poetic language is endowed with the power to recreate links with the nonhuman animals that our very presence has killed. The story takes place in New York City, where the “phantoms” of the animals that have been displaced or killed because of urban spread still haunt the streets. Jane Weddell, the main character, experiences a sense of connection with those dead nonhuman animals. Thanks to her imagination, she manages to “restor[e] relationships” with the nonhuman world. One day, on her way to work, she notices an open and seemingly abandoned lot. At first, the place looks quite unremarkable, and yet she is attracted to it, and she believes that she can see wild animals wander there every day. She observes the spectral birds, deer, and foxes of the lot:

Early in the fall she saw a herd of deer, four does browsing and seeming to take no notice of her. The same morning she didn’t notice until she was leaving a switching tail, a tawny panther hunkered in the tawny grass. [...]

Every time Jane Weddell passed she would see animals. Even on the rawest days, when wind drove a dry, cold wall of air against her or when sleet fell, she would see foxes bounding. Flocks of chickadees. Sometimes she imagined she could hear a distant river. Other times she saw birds migrating overhead, through the buildings. (Lopez 2004: 41)

- 16 At first, the repetition of the verb “to see,” the expression “take no notice of her” and the list of nonhuman animals suggest that there is no interaction between Jane and the animals. They remind us of our responsibility in the destruction of the animals’ habitats and recreate the temporal distance that separates us from them. However, such enchanting and unreal visions have an organic and emotional impact on Jane. The alliterations in “w”—“on the rawest days, when wind drove a cold wall of air against her”—and in “k,” as well as the nominal sentence—“flocks of chickadees”—restore a sense of the animals’ proximity and ways of beings, even if they died many years ago, before the city was built. The effect produced by the ghost-like appearances of wild animals leads Jane to question the sustainability of our urban modes of living and to think about how she can act to protect nonhuman nature and to change their lot. Two years after she saw the lot for the first time, a building is being constructed in its place. This leads her to meditate on the fact that many animal lives did not leave a trace of their passage on earth, and on “why she had not done something, whatever that might have been.” (Lopez 2004: 41) By resorting to rhythmic and sound patterns which give a sense of the animals’ ways of living, Lopez reveals that poetic writing, just like cities, are not purely human constructions; they are “multi-species events” (Moe 2013: 8) which involve the participation of various agents. Poetic writing thus holds an ethical dimension: it invites us to acknowledge the role and the sacrifice of nonhuman animals in the building of our urban environments, and proposes a model of respectful cohabitation between human and nonhuman animals.

## Conclusion

- 17 According to Timothy Morton, nonhuman nature has too often been represented as being “over there,” an entity that remains distant from our familiar and daily experiences; on the contrary, he asserts, it is “right here.” (Morton 2009: 164) Through two different approaches (Bass with an elegiac and pessimistic perspective and Lopez with a more positive and contemplative stance), the two writers celebrate the multispecies entanglements that occur in urban areas. They intimate that it is urgent that we become aware of the essential role nonhuman animals have played in the construction of our urban environments, or of their discreet presence in cities. Bears, herons, or

giant fish do not always live in remote places that only an elite can encounter through outdoors activities, and city dwellers are not cut off from nonhuman nature. By describing unexpected appearances of nonhuman animals that were thought to live in isolated areas in a vacant lot, in a busy street or in a suburban pool with a writing that takes into account the agency of nonhuman animals in urban constructions and poetic creation, Bass's and Lopez's short stories challenge the notion of human exceptionalism. In doing so, they also renew the definition of the wild and of cities. Indeed, the wild cannot only be found in the wilderness, which is actually a cultural construct, and cities are not unnatural spaces, as they are places in which human and nonhuman beings coexist, temporarily or permanently, in a visible or invisible way. The two writers thus help city dwellers, which constitute the largest part of their readership, reconnect with the nonhuman world and deepen their awareness of the interrelatedness between all living things by showing us how to adopt a biocentric look even in what seem to be the most anthropized spaces.

---

## Works cited

Abram, David, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*, New York: Vintage Books, 2011.

Bass, Rick, *The Book of Yaak*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996.

Bass, Rick, *In the Loyal Mountains*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995.

Bass, Rick, *The Watch*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1989.

Cronon, William, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1996.

Dassow Walls, Laura, "Wilderness and Wildness in Thoreauvian Science", in *Thoreau's Sense of Place. Essays in Ame-*

*rican Environmental Writing*, Richard J. Schneider (ed), Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, p. 15-28.

Grandjeat, Yves-Charles, "Regarder à perte de vue et écrire quand même : quelques propositions sur la littérature écologique américaine", in : *Revue Française d'Études Américaines*, vol. 106, n° 4, Paris : Belin, décembre 2005, p. 19-32.

Helmore, Edward, "'We're living in emergency times': Nature Writer Barry Lopez's Dire Warning", in: *The Guardian*, May 7 2019.

Latour, Bruno, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes : essai d'anthropologie symétrique*, Paris : La Découverte, 1997.

Lopez, Barry Holstun, *Winter Count*, New York: Vintage Books, 1999.

Lopez, Barry Holstun, *Field Notes: The Grace Note of the Canyon Wren*, New York: Vintage Books, 2004.

Malm, Andreas, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*, New York: Verso, 2016.

Moe, Aaron, *Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry*, Langham: Lexington Books, 2013.

Morton, Timothy, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Pughe, Thomas, "Brute Neighbors: The Modernity of a Metaphor", in: *Thoreauvian Modernities. Transatlantic Conver-*

*sations on an American Icon*, Michel Granger, François Specq and Laura Walls (eds.), Athens: Georgia University Press, 2013, p. 249-264.

Simon, Anne, "Animots infimes d'Anne Simon", *Le Carnet de Techniques & Culture*, 2018.

Document électronique consultable à : <https://tc.hypotheses.org/798>. Page consultée le 17 mars 2021.

Tredinnick, Mark, *The Land's Wild Music: Encounters with Barry Lopez, Peter Matthiessen, Terry Tempest Williams, and James Galvin*, San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2005.

---

1 « [D]es mondes s'entrecroisent dans le nôtre, et leurs fils s'empêtrent dans nos histoires d'humains, des humains dont on sait aujourd'hui qu'aucune survie ne leur est possible sans précisément cet empêchement, ce parasitisme, cette symbiose, cette habitation en eux par des vivants infimes. »

2 « On peut aussi avancer que certains modes de représentation constituent une forme d'exploitation (symbolique), de soumission du monde naturel aux intérêts (même artistiques) de l'homme. »

---

## English

American nature writing tends to focus on wilderness or rural life. And yet, some nature writers occasionally set their short stories in urban and suburban areas. In short stories by Rick Bass and Barry Lopez, the presence of large mammals or migrating birds in the outskirts of Houston or in the streets of New York City challenges our definitions of what constitutes the wild. Displacing the motif of the encounter between a human and certain animals in an urban area suggests that environmental consciousness is not limited to those who are in contact with the wilderness; city dwellers who have learnt to perceive wildness in the streets they cross every day, in the neighborhoods they live in, or in their own backyards may experience a

sense of connection with nonhuman nature and re-enchant their relationships with nonhuman animals.

### **Français**

L'écriture de la nature nord-américaine tend à se concentrer sur le monde sauvage ou rural. Or, certains auteurs de la nature placent parfois le décor de leurs nouvelles dans des zones urbaines et suburbaines. Dans quelques nouvelles de Rick Bass et de Barry Lopez, la présence de grands mammifères ou d'oiseaux migrateurs dans la périphérie de Houston ou dans les rues de New York remet en question nos définitions de ce qui constitue la nature sauvage. En déplaçant le motif de la rencontre entre un humain et certains animaux dans une zone urbaine, les auteurs suggèrent qu'avoir une conscience environnementale n'est pas réservé à celles et à ceux qui sont en contact avec la nature dite « sauvage ». En effet, les citadins qui ont appris à percevoir la nature non humaine dans les rues qu'ils traversent chaque jour, dans les quartiers où ils vivent ou dans leur propre jardin peuvent éprouver un sentiment de connexion avec elle et ré-enchanter leurs relations avec les animaux non humains.

---

### **Mots-clés**

urbain, suburbain, animaux non humains, zoopoétique, écocritique urbaine

### **Keywords**

urban, suburb, non-human animals, zoopoetic, urban ecocriticism

---

### **Claire Cazajous-Augé**

MCF, Cultures Anglo-Saxonnes (E.A. 801), Université Toulouse – Jean Jaurès, 5  
Allée Antonio Machado, 31058 Toulouse