

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Barry Lopez, Richard Nelson, Terry Tempest Williams. *Patriotism and the American Land*. Great Barrington, Mass.: The Orion Society, 2002. 120 pp. \$8.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-913098-61-5.

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Published on H-Net (December, 2002)



## Who Are the Real Patriots?

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This book came along at just the right time. Like many of us, I've been pondering, turning over again and again in my mind, what it means to be "patriotic." The events of September 11 have not only erased a sense of personal security but have also exacerbated our nation's economic woes. Every day we hear various opinions. One camp holds that our fiscal solution lies in contributing vigorously to the economy, engaging in some well-needed retail therapy. The other camp dares to ask, "What if, just what if, we could reduce our dependence on foreign oil? Wouldn't this lead to a reduced military presence throughout the world, ultimately making us more secure?"

*Patriotism and the American Land* contains one essay each by Richard Nelson, Barry Lopez, and Terry Tempest Williams. All three authors are linked by their belief that their writing about the natural world has a higher purpose than merely illuminating the interactions they witness. Their writings are reminiscent of Revolutionary War-era patriots—that is, their objective is to spawn reflection, discussion, and, ultimately, a call to action.

Richard Nelson is a writer, activist, and anthropologist who lives near the Tongass National Forest in southeastern Alaska. Over the past twenty years, he has participated in efforts to channel local logging practices toward a more sustainable future. He reveals that during the 1960s, he marched and protested against the Vietnam War, the denial of civil rights, and corporate abuses.

Many of us who came of age during the Vietnam War-Watergate years can relate to his admission that "the idea of patriotism has not rested comfortably in my soul ... at least not until recently" (p. 10).

But now, Nelson sees things in a different light, acknowledging that every public meeting, ballot initiative, or letter written represents a reflection of our democratic process—an opportunity to have one's voice heard. He reflects on the work of activists in other countries, places where those who speak up have little chance of influencing outcomes. Although cognizant of the imperfections in our political system, seeing the results of his work—salmon-filled streams and lush forests instead of barren stumplands—engenders in him a growing sense of patriotism.

Barry Lopez lives in western Oregon, near the McKenzie River. A thirty-year pastime of his has been a near-daily pilgrimage to watch the river flow, to listen to what it has to say. He is content in knowing that even a time frame of nearly a third of a century is insufficient to truly know something as complex as a river. He notes a shift in the perspective of naturalists over the past fifty years, an acknowledgement that to fully know a species requires an immersion in its milieu. Lopez expresses reservations with those who observe an area for several years and then judge themselves equipped to tell local government officials how the land should be managed. He opines that modern-day naturalists—experientially based and well versed in the intricacies

of natural ecosystems—are ideally suited to become involved in the political process. Because naturalists are acutely aware of degraded and shrinking habitats, many of them feel compelled to do more than merely record the damage.

Terry Tempest Williams first heard Rachel Carson's name when she was seven or eight years old. As she and her grandmother set out seed for birds, her grandmother asked Terry to imagine a world without birds or waking up to a morning without birdsong. Through her grandparents' discussions at the dinner table, Williams learned of a new book—*Silent Spring*—that detailed the dangers of pesticides. Although most of us know of this seminal work, Williams justly feels that the true strength of the book and its message remain underappreciated. "It is impossible for us not to be inspired by Rachel Carson's emotional and intellectual stamina, by her ability to endure the pain of the story she was telling" (p. 44). Carson set an example to which future scientists can aspire, for her contributions went far beyond the mere chronicling of the unraveling web of life. Her willingness to challenge the pro-pesticide status quo stands as a selfless, courageous act. In very public fashion, Carson bore witness to the horrors she'd witnessed, demanding that citizens hold corporations and our government accountable.

Williams discloses something not widely known about Rachel Carson—that her college coursework included both literature and science. As I am also both a writer and a scientist, this speaks to me. It suggests that these troubled times require a more concerted collaboration between scientists, writers, and activists if we are

to repair neglected relationships between countries and communities, both natural and cultural.

Any quest to become a true patriot invariably begins with an effort to better delineate the positive attributes embodied by those identified as patriots. Williams succinctly asks, "And do we have the imagination to rediscover an authentic patriotism that inspires empathy and reflection over pride and nationalism?" (p. 58).

Each of the authors has a unique personal style—differing vantage points on how we as citizens can best affect the democratic process. All three essays eloquently remind us of our inalienable right to speak our minds, encourage us to stand and be counted, and to let our voices be heard. Williams's portrayal of Rachel Carson reminds us of the power of a single voice to educate others, resulting in a transformation of public opinion.

Today, in numbers not seen since the Vietnam War, citizens are scrutinizing and debating the decisions made by our leaders. It's clear to me that democracy requires an informed electorate to function properly. In my opinion, many of us have grown lazy, content to let twenty-second sound bites summarize complex issues. Remember when we were young, how intoxicated we were by the acquisition of knowledge? It will take a re-dedication of spirit, a willingness to dig a little deeper for the truth, if we all are to contribute to keeping democracy afloat.

[Editor's note: The foreword and excerpts from each essay in *Patriotism and the American Land* are available online at <http://www.oriononline.org/pages/os/marketplace/bookstore/OSbooks/patriotism.html>.]

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**Citation:** Tom Leskiw. Review of Lopez, Barry; Nelson, Richard; Williams, Terry Tempest, *Patriotism and the American Land*. H-Net, H-Net Reviews. December, 2002.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6996>

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