Nature in the Gaps: Ecodelic Ecology in Charles Bowden’s Desert Trilogy

Such would be the successive phases of the image: it is the reflection of a profound reality; it masks and denatures a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum.

—(Baudrillard 6)

The distinction between persons and things or subjects and objects condenses from this primary distinction [between what is acceptable as information and what is merely utterance]. Only with the mastery of this semantic is it possible to arrive at the idea of an analogy between one’s own and foreign minds. As long as mastery is not attained (or at least not with today’s precision), then the boundaries of the social communication system will be drawn differently than they are today.

—(Luhmann, Theories of Distinction 181)

Introduction

Charles Bowden’s desert trilogy is not nature writing. Although there is a clear ecological interest, since Inferno was written as part of a project to create the Sonoran Desert Natural Monument, Bowden’s
writing does not fit with the genre and it refuses neat categorization. Dana Phillips notes that for many nature books there is an “ideal reader ... someone who feels almost entirely cut off from the natural world, who interprets ignorance of natural history as a symptom of a debilitating spiritual malaise, and who imagines that an intense experience, perhaps only one such experience, of some natural phenomenon will provide a means of resuming intimacy and daily commerce with the earth” (193). Charles Bowden clearly understands and draws upon that tradition, writing that “I want to get this part clear. I sought to sketch a plan, a way of living that would heal the earth, bring the balm of peace to the households, and fill the air with incense. I would incite an invisible insurrection of millions of souls who would march toward a better future. I would end the war between my people and the ground under them” (Inferno 15). However, he quickly undermines his place in the canon of traditional nature writing and its literary purposes where “maybe I’d even get invited to conferences and wear leather walking shoes and get a haircut” (15). For Bowden, “All this went by the boards, almost immediately” (15) as he was not interested in nature writing. In Phillips’ terms, the nature writer insists “that human consciousness is alienated from the natural world which is less rationally ordered and therefore more mysterious than the human mind would like it to be” (191) and there is a certain assumption that humans must tap into that energy to find themselves and heal their differences. Bowden has “resigned [himself] to a messy life and an untamed mind” (Inferno 16), and while he can ascribe difference between himself and others, it is very uncertain where those differences lie and how the borders are drawn, or even who the others are. His idea of difference is not one of alienation, but of intersection and enmeshing, where things get messy and the lines are not clearly under anyone’s control.

Bowden’s different approach is revealed even in the physical presence of the books themselves. Charles Bowden’s trilogy of Inferno, Exodus/Exodo, and Trinity is a huge set of books, in the physical sense. They are coffee table books in style and size, with numerous pictures and sparse text. However, it is Charles Bowden’s prose, with an aesthetic that rollicks between the sublime and the ridiculous that seems to drive the interpretation of the photographs and the interpretation of the desert world. Bowden lets the world in the photographs be his background, as he writes about many other things, usually involving himself and his sensations. The three together are considered a desert trilogy, but one of them, Exodus/Exodo, clearly does not belong. Its photographer is different, the focus of the text is different, and the book has a very different feel. The other two books, with pictures by Michael Berman, are more conventional in their approach. They contain
beautiful and chilling black and white photographs of empty desert and discarded artifacts. What is left behind is usually twisted, destroyed, or bleached bits of bone, wood, and plastic that belonged to people. The photographs otherwise are full of emptiness, without even captions to tell where they were taken. They are pure evocations. In *Exodus*, pictures are often in color, and they often depict people. The desert, rather than being sterile and empty, is full of life. Human life. However, the sense of desperation and sterility in the desert is only enhanced by these human images, and, with the text, provide a gap in perception that allows Bowden’s gonzo, often hallucinogenic prose to bring the desert closer to reality for the reader.

Each book is loosely associated with a Biblical theme and a historical story of loss. *Inferno*, with its titles of “Fair Warning” and “Strike a Match” is apocalyptic in its aesthetic, focusing on stories of loss and need, whether those of various native and white settlers in the Sonoran desert or simple stories of love and lust in the contemporary world. For Bowden those stories are deeply related and relevant to one another. *Exodus* deals with the human cost of political borders and the many struggles of Mexico’s history, particularly the life of Pancho Villa. The title evokes the biblical *Exodus* and the movement of a disenfranchised and enslaved people across the desert to the hope of a better life. The nature of the desert becomes an all-consuming source of concern because the lives of real people are at risk when crossing it. The focus on the immigrants moves the natural world to the background, even as, for the immigrants, it foregrounds their chances of success or failure, or even life or death. Finally, *Trinity* returns to the earlier form, with black and white nature pictures and an explicit idea of the Christian Trinity, as expressed through life in a desert environment and played against the Trinity nuclear explosion. The history is grounded with the history of the Comanche and the Kiowa at the borders of Texas and New Mexico and around the Rio Grande. The central images of house made of tracks and fire are images that evoke the most common signs of existence within a desert, such as tracks of whatever animals have passed (including humans) and fire to indicate vegetation that can burn. Bruno Latour has famously pointed out that the modern world is one of distinction and difference, and yet the tracks and fires and bones all point to a similarity between nature and humans. They all eventually cease to exist.

Nature and humanity are so distinct in their needs and their various lives that “this separation has been viewed as a double ontological distinction” (Latour 13). If one elides this distinction, then, one cannot be a modern human being. However, as Luhmann’s quote in the epigram illustrates, the idea of the modern boundary is one of perspective, not
ontological but based on what a society is willing to see. Bowden’s use of Kiowa and Comanche history and the focus on “premodern” (by Latour’s reckoning) people whose history overlaps modernity, along with Berman and Cardona’s pictures, challenges the attributions of natural and human systems and foregrounds the strangeness of the desert and its effect on living things. This ambient approach transgresses boundaries in every direction and reveals the enmeshed nature of nature and humans. As Ian Bogost points out, “Once we put down the trappings of culture and take the invitation into that great outdoors, a tremendous wave of surprise and unexpectedness would overwhelm us” (Kindle). Bowden takes that step into the outdoors often, but finds that the “trappings” of culture are already mixed up with what we take as the natural world. For Bowden, as for Latour, we have never been modern, or at least not as modern as we think we are.

Living in the Wasteland: Desert Places in Inferno

The difference between the pictorial representations in the trilogy and Bowden’s narrative shows that the language which the western world privileges as communication is not the only form of communicative offering or possibility. He is not interested in nature writing as “some beyond of literature, call it nature or wilderness or environment where deliverance from the constraints of culture, particularly the constraints known as theory, might be found” (Phillips 162). Bowden’s narrative takes on the human subsystems (law, politics, morality, war, even love) and often does not seem to match the pictures that accompany it, yet the two types of observation open up what I think of as imaginative gaps which shift the distinction between humanity and nature, where, in Phillips’s terms “there is, for example, nature: sticks and stones, grasshoppers, and butterflies, catfish and Cooper’s hawks, moose and flying squirrels, river valleys and archipelagos, tropical depressions and northeasters, the earth below and the sky above” (162), as opposed to the hyperreal idea of nature in nature writing, which can only be a simulacrum of nature itself. Eco, when visiting Disneyland, noted that “[i]t makes it clear that within its magic enclosure it is fantasy that is absolutely reproduced” (43). Bowden, writing his fantasies of nature, makes us see the hyperreal activity of writing and reminds us that nature writing cannot be nature, but only a simulacrum. However, by making the simulacrum visible, he also allows the reader to imagine that the life of nature does not simply exist for our existence and pleasure, nor at our sufferance, but has systems, communication, and lives of its own that are observable and even, sometimes, capable of communicating with us if we only knew how to accept their
offerings as information. Perhaps lives in nature simply communicate for their own sake and are indifferent to us, exactly as human existence has its own interests and agendas although it is interpenetrated with and mutually influenced by and influencing nature.

Bowden, himself, in his introduction to *Inferno*, says that nature is silent: “She, of course, will say nothing. Forty days and nights and not a single word. Just those damn bones that keep singing” (17). Baudrillard argues that “Making animals speak, as one has made the insane, children, sex (Foucault) speak. This is even deluded with regard to animals, whose principle of uncertainty, which they have caused to weigh on men since the rupture in their alliance with men, resides in the fact that they do not speak” (136). The bones are almost archetypal images of the desert, and, indeed Berman’s illustrations on pages 22 and 23 of *Inferno* reinforce readers’ expectations with stark images of ocotillo ribs embedded in mud and a mummified goat. The bones are death and desiccation, but in Bowden’s hallucinatory state, they sing. They are not silent, but their song, like all songs in nature, is untranslatable and therefore relegated to background noise. Bowden’s bone song is a hyperreal analogy to human communication and language which accepts both the difference between and the shared life of the desert and the humans that pass through it. It acknowledges that human language is not the only form of communication. Bowden’s singing bones are, for him the representation and recreation of life in the desert. They are the background of Bowden’s experiences, variously louder or softer depending on how much attention he pays. However, as he pays attention to their psychedelic manifestations, they evoke fear and awe. As Rich Doyle points out “‘psychedelic’ comes from the Greek for ‘manifesting mind,’ and evolution’s dizzying and diverse array of life-forms emerging over time on the surface of one planet indeed ‘manifests’ minds sometimes capable of ‘thinking’ about evolution: . . . And in awe we forget ourselves” (Doyle 21). In fact, the very existence of the bones in the Sonoran desert and the richness of life from which they derive become immanent experiences for Bowden an “ecodilic testimony that these encounters with immanence render the ego into a non sequitur, the self becoming tangibly a gift manifested by a much larger dissipative structure, the planet, the galaxy, the cosmos” (Doyle Kindle 21). Or, for Bowden, the expanse of the Sonoran desert.

For the photographer, Berman, that expanse is empty. There are few photos of life in the book; a few cacti, some scrub, and some beautiful ivy and cedar that have to be near a spring or a well (143, 154). There are no living animals at all. There is the desiccated goat mentioned earlier, ram skulls on page 117, a mummified pair of ravens on a road on
page 73, and what might be the skin of a long-dead, scavenged cow on page 122. Human occupation is indicated only by detritus (27, 44, 49, 63) and, oddly enough, on page 142 with tracks of dune buggies and human footprints. The implicit criticism of humanity’s destructive nature in that photo in the picture is both acknowledged and disrupted by Bowden’s prose which states that “we live in two worlds. There is this garden where the temperature is controlled, the weather steady, the food bland but ample, the screens programmed and relentless . . . . It is the footprint of the industrial world with a cyber overlay. And then there the rest of the bogs and deserts and catastrophic urban nodes, places where balance is still a rumor, not a fact” (144). However, “[his] desert is a piece of this planetary hell, and because of this fact, [his] desert is truer to the facts than the garden can ever be . . . the garden is steady and steady is death” (144). Bowden is not interested in nature in this modernist sense, with his friend Edward Abbey who “kept fashioning a bristling ethics based on folks pulling back their appetites, escaping industrialism and finding some kind of balm inside a word called wilderness. He recommended some well-placed wrenches to hasten this work along” (168). Bowden cannot see the world in the same way, cannot find a way to divorce himself or other humans from nature. Instead he will “turn [his] ideas away from the pornography of the nature photography, burn the books of nature essays to test Lord Kelvin’s laws and leave more than [his] footprints” (129). He worries that “people with a deep interest in the natural world seem to lack a deep interest in burlesque, make-up, high heels, and the Kamasutra. There are simply not enough push-up bras on the trail, or wine corks for that matter” (129). He takes issue with an American obsession with “realism where, if a reconstruction is to be credible, it must be absolutely iconic, a perfect likeness, a ‘real’ copy of the reality being represented” (Eco 4). Of course, as Bowden is noting, the reality itself is always shifting and is not iconic. His foregrounding of imaginative sounds and experiences in the desert equates them with the experiences and memories of his own life. It is, for him, as well as for the reader, a form of madness, a sound that he hears because “lying here in the heat, I tend to wander and there seems to be no help for this. My mind will not stay put” (Inferno 25). The result, when reading his work, is often disconcerting, but it serves a purpose of breaking down a distinction in point of view. He realized that humans are a part of nature as well, and “our destiny has never been separate from theirs [the animals], and this is a sort of bitter revenge on Human Reason, which has become used to upholding the absolute privilege of the Human over the Bestial” (Baudrillard 133). After all, Bowden asks, “Can the natural world be saved if we are not animals?” (129). This belief in the
entanglement of the world is what keeps Bowden from being a nature writer.

**Trinity: The Spirits of Space**

In *Trinity*, the hallucinogenic effect is accomplished through another form of neurological event, the rush of a religious experience: “I always rise before dawn with coffee in my hand and yes in my mouth . . . . I will stand there, no doubt a ghost, my tongue coated with pollen, my dead ears ringing from the songs of birds. I believe this with my heart and soul, but my God, it has been a struggle to keep the faith” (11). This image nicely incorporates a number of “foreign” points of view, referencing a Native American salute to the dawn with pollen and prayer, the pollen itself as something that blows and covers the tongue, and God in his various forms and manifestations among humans. An image of a small Palm Sunday cross on page 55 reinforces the early religious imagery, as do the naming of sections after the Holy Trinity: father, son, and holy ghost. However, in the desert there is always the haunting of the other American Trinity, the test site for the atomic bomb. The entanglement of millennia of religious wasteland images of the desert with the nuclear age lends an apocalyptic tone to this particular book. The desert is a difficult place and even “the weather is not faithful. The rains come or do not come, the storms rage or there is nothing in the sky for months. The beasts thrive, or vanish without warning . . . . People steal people” (3). There are more photos of living creatures in this book than in *Inferno*, but the creatures are either shaggy, feral-seeming goats and cows (185, 127) or, more than once, a peculiarly American viper, the rattlesnake (154, 172). These pictures, combined with lightning-blasted trees, photos such as the one on pages 122–23 of a blasted fence and an empty doorway framing a picture of the Sacred Heart, and aerial photographs showing the stark line dividing areas that get rain from areas that do not (56, 110) make this seem to be a land abandoned and laid to waste.

Bowden’s prose, in this case, defies the sense of abandonment by filling the book with the history of the place. He tells stories of Kit Carson, Geronimo, Pancho Villa, monks, kidnapped brides, and Robert Oppenheimer. However, his sense of the history of the place is apocalyptic in a different way. He links the human culture of the place with the natural by equating the constant struggle for resources and survival in an unpredictable landscape. The human social system is formed, as are all systems, by distinction between the system and the environment. Artistic representations reframe the system by simplifying it and, as it were, moving observers outside the systemic
boundaries. They change the semantic paradigms about what is “one’s own and foreign minds” (Luhmann 181). The use of the atomic bomb and its damage is particularly interesting here, since it was the product of quantum mechanics and this particular branch of science emphasizes that all things are entangled together at their most fundamental levels. Bowden, in his writing about desert environments, understands that strong entanglement. He is not interested in some idea of a pure and kindly nature that is outside of man and exists to purify him from civilization. Instead, as physicist Karen Barad notes “it is ironic that while environmental activists are busy reifying a notion of nature based on purity, with all its problematic implications, the enterprise of bioengineering [and other technoscientific efforts] [are] making it clear that the nature-culture dualism is a construction” (Kindle file). Charles Bowden’s writing about the Southern Desert at the border between the United States and Mexico shows the modernist blind spot about “environment.” Nature is not just the human environment, nor is it something strictly “out there” and inaccessible to our minds. He uses an oneiric scenario, to illustrate, that for him, the human and the natural struggle in the desert are one and the same:

flames scorch my mind, the horizon goes orange, and I recall an ashtray from spent ordnance of one of those wars and then, I pause while a violet-crowned hummingbird hovers over the orange bloom of a desert honeysuckle, go into stop-time, the flower beckoning, bird hovering, thrum of wings slashing the silence of the lazy afternoon, and suddenly I am back and I am not a man without a country but I am a man with ground on fire and nothing I know or feel or dream can still the flames. (240)

Bowden makes the reader feel a sense of unease and of the precarity of survival by juxtaposing very stark and seemingly empty natural spaces in photographs with a rich and subjective prose that opens up the very strangeness of distinction and troubles the sense of a unique humanity separate from and immune to the consequences of our actions in the world.

Exodus/Exodo: Alien Humans in the Borderland

Bowden is very much concerned with the effect that invasion and conquest has had on both the ways of life within this desert place, and on the living things themselves. The idea of extinction runs rampant; in hidden caves, abandoned tracks, scalps and robes, and old rituals and
thoughts. For him, extinction of humans and the priority given to one set of humans over another is intimately linked to the priority that man, particularly white European man, has given to himself over nature. However, in allowing “the idea of an analogy between one’s own and foreign minds” (Luhmann 181), Bowden does not make the pretense that some other nature writers have done. He does not try to pretend that he can be something other than he is, a human being. Rather than attempting to escape anthropocentrism, which is impossible anyway, Bowden embraces it. His points of view usually whirl between his own experience, stories from the history of the desert, and the description of events and things around him in the desert. By making those links he makes himself, and the rest of humanity, simply things among many others. In addition, his voice is intermingled with the perspective and the aesthetic of the photographs that accompany the prose.

His most anthropocentric book in the trilogy, *Exodus/Exodo*, the only book with pictures of people, also is the most illustrative of this shifting center. The photographer, Julian Cardona, unlike Michael Berman, has a written voice in the work. Cardona’s contribution is a particular story of life at the border and the violence and fear associated with illegal immigration. His pictures are both in black and white and in color and people are foregrounded in the images as well as the narrative. If the pictures in *Inferno* and *Trinity* tend to erase any signs of human existence, Cardona seems to want his photos to show overabundance of life at the borders, and to make a seemingly erased life visible. To this end, the pictures have captions that describe what is happening to the people and where it is happening.

Even Cardona’s cover image is a powerful testament to the link between human life and nature. It is an image of a place in the desert near the border. A sandy arroyo surrounded by scrub trees and small hills is almost completely covered by the detritus of a fleeing people. It contains children’s backpacks, clothes, water bottles, purses, etc. Humans have shed their identities like skins, in order to find the protective coloring that will make them fit in another world. It is a tremendous image of loss, not only for the people who have left these things (where have they gone, are they all right?) but also for a natural environment where these things will last for a long, long time, leaching chemicals into the soil, disturbing natural habitats (not to mention the disturbance of millions of feet and stripping people), and perhaps, providing new homes for some creatures who are better at adapting to this particular circumstance, in much the same way that the people crossing the border are adapting.
This and other photos in the book also show that humans, migratory animals with varying and adapting plumage, are, like other animals, creatures that have a drive to survive and to find areas where their chances are better, “at the moment human beings are moving all over the planet to save their hides” (Exodus 3). These particular humans, migrating from south of the U.S. border, are also illustrative of the way that social systems form distinctions about what is human and acceptable, and what is nature and therefore outside of human consideration. By analogy, these migratory humans have experienced some of the experience of being a prey animal. Bowden acknowledges the animalistic images often given to people who lie outside of our borders and the fear that is attached to their coming, by writing that “things have been upended, the moon rises at a strange hour, it is blood red, and dripping with hunger” (3). For the people crossing the border, “it’s a different desert when you’re being hunted. They’ve spent their lives as human beings. They cross the wire and they become deer, surrounded by lions” (Bowden 23–24). In allowing this anthropomorphic metaphor, Bowden analogizes deer with humans and yet also frees the deer “like ghosts from the prison of human experience” (Bogost Kindle), because humans can understand the fear of humans being dehumanized, but not the everyday, ordinary, experience of being a deer and built as a prey creature. However, the immigrants, as strange strangers, touch that experience and perception, and illustrate the problem with boundaries. Their uncanny ecomimesis of deer is one way that Bowden reminds the reader of the enmeshing of environments and objects within them. Human beings do not escape being one natural system among many. As Luhmann points out, it is all in the distinctions that are made, and the primary distinction is what is acceptable, or what matters as a concern for any one system.

Analogies with Foreign Minds

Allowing the problems of immigration in the desert to flow with the ideas of the ecology of the desert enmeshes them together and brings us close to the strangers amidst us, and allowing anthropocentrism and accepting the ambiguity in all relationships helps to define why Bowden cannot accept some environment “out there” but instead finds a place that is irrevocably “here” and “now.” According to Bogost, “theory has attempted to split the world into two halves, human and nature. Human culture is allowed to be multifarious and complex, but the natural or material world is only ever permitted to be singular” (Kindle). Bowden, however, with his emphasis on visions, ecstasies, stories, and ghosts becomes what Doyle would call an
“econaut” whose “ecodelic experience tunes perception through a shift of sensory-motor rations toward an apprehension of, and facility for, interconnection” (Kindle 34). Bowden is not interested in a dualism that separates humans and nature or the intellect from the emotions, instead insisting upon the interconnection of life on this planet, and using the starkness of desert places to emphasize the fragile nature of all existence if human society continues to insist upon its uniqueness. The use of photographs heightens the sense of shifting points of view simply because they tell a story in themselves, offering not only the photographer’s point of view and perspective, but also the reader/observer’s points of view about what is being shown and shared and how it relates to Bowden’s prose. In addition, the photos often evince an eerie absence or lack in the forms of bones, trash, and abandoned places that evoke something or someone that just left.

Bowden’s descriptions in *Exodus* of the immigrants crossing the border to work in the United States, his realization of them as hunted beings, juxtaposed with Cardona’s often very homely pictures of men, women, and children simply living their lives, opens up a space of the uncanny, where what should be utterly familiar is turned alien and unwanted. Cardona also evokes uncanniness when he shows pictures of empty mansions in Mexico built for some immigrant who will never come home to occupy them (*Exodus* 216–17). In a hyperreal moment, those empty houses echo the same type of structures in the United States, where small families are rarely in residence in their huge houses, which stand empty much of the time. In much the same way, in the other two books, Bowden’s descriptions of an alien nature, coupled with the pictures of dry bones, and vast, unwelcoming landscapes, work with his almost menacing intimacy in his descriptions of sex, drinking, drugs, and coffee, and become uncanny reminders of things just getting on in the world, much like ourselves.

Nature’s “Voice” in Bowden’s Writing

Bowden’s contempt for “nature writing” makes this set of books both particularly ironic, in that they are considered nature writing, and also poignant in their willingness to listen and to analogize the alien and the strange in the world around him. In addition, his own anthropocentrism and his acknowledgment that he cannot escape it help the reader to acknowledge his strangeness in his environment. The surreal gaps of his writing, the frenetic pace and the flood of images, both written and photographic, add to the strangeness. Bowden seeks to bring the strangeness forward and to escape the romance of nature writing. He is “not here to lament, or complain. [He] simply wish[es] to stop
denying the obvious past and present” (Trinity 8). The intervention of human history becomes mediation between human and other beings. Nature disappears into natures and natural beings become witnesses to their own life and loss, no longer mute, but loud enough to drive a man insane. Nature does not communicate, but natural beings do communicate and they do it all the time, with each other, and, whether intentionally or not, with humans, as part of their world. The voice that Bowden brings to light is not found either in the text or in the pictures but in the moments that each records and the imaginative gap that they leave to the interpretation of the reader. Luhmann’s theory of social systems posits communication as a three-fold selection: 1) for utterance (is what is being communicated recognized as communication?), 2) for information (is the utterance pertinent to the receiver and does it contain information?), and 3) for (mis)understanding (181). The fact that humans often fail to recognize communication or that it is misunderstood because humans confuse language (medium) with communication, does not mean that natural beings are not communicating. As Eco notes, “it seems ... very important to bear in mind the various links in this chain [of communication] because when they are overlooked there are misunderstandings that prevent us from observing the phenomenon with attention” (138–39). Certainly Bowden is interested in paying attention to what nature is communicating. The gaps that these books open up are on the level of imagination and wonder, but those gaps, the moments when the reader thinks “wait, what does that really mean?” or “where are the animals in the pictures?” make it possible to imagine other minds that have agendas, lives, and purposes of their own. These purposes do not require a human “subject” to go on, nor is either their living or their extinction romanticized by Bowden’s observations. Bowden is no romantic, or at least he tries not to be. His feelings are raw, offensive, and on display. It makes him difficult to read, but also opens up a dissonance between what he is writing and what the reader is observing. This second-order level of observation makes the natural world in the books come to life and “speak” for itself.

Conclusion

It is not easy to hear, or indeed to portray, the communicative offerings of nature. When Bowden writes about “his” desert and the place which he occupies, but where he does not belong, he is part of “America’s avid pursuit of the real [which] invariably gives rise to the hyperreal” (Phillips 20). American readers want the nature writer, to provide “the pleasure of imitation” that allows us to “enjoy the conviction that imitation has reached its apex and afterwards reality will
always be inferior to it” (Eco 46). Phillips’ (and Eco’s) point is particularly apt when reading Bowden’s gonzo-style prose that emphasizes blood, sex, and death as the true realities. For Bowden, the experience of nature, particularly nature in the desert, “would strike us stone dead if we did not ward it off with our nature books” (Inferno 78). His approach of ecological thinking rather than nature writing results in a confusing, exhilarating, and, at times, hallucinatory journey through the desert. One is accompanied along the way by Bowden’s seemingly jumbled recollections of women, history, immigrants and Border Patrol, bats and Native Americans, coffee, whiskey, and heat, among many other things. Phillips’ term for this approach is “symmetrical” and it “as often as not lands us in a jumble of nature and culture, culture and nature—a confusing place where we are bound to be uncomfortable” (134). Bowden acknowledges that there is no way out of messiness and paradox. The enmeshing of the natural and human world is what exists and even as differences and distinctions are acknowledged, Bowden in his dark ecological thought realizes that there is no such thing as a nature/human divide, because the natural world is not some absent environment to the human civilization. For better or worse, the lives of humans and other beings are always intertwined, or as Karen Barad would name it, entangled.

Bowden’s work in these three coffee table narratives allows a sort of ambient voice of nature to arise in conjunction with the voices of humans throughout. He shows that just as we have never been modern, we have also never been exclusively “human” in the sense of non-natural. He shows that natural life does communicate. He also shows that the system known as life is complex, intricately interdependent, and depends on destruction as much as survival. Bowden sums up the enmeshing of humanity and nature in his final book, Trinity:

and I am my father’s son and my mother’s son and I love the ground and cringe at the flogging we have given it and the hawks swirl overhead, bones of dead warriors molder on the hillside, big wheel keep on turning, and I don’t place a bet, not one, because I am walking toward the flames, and into the flames, and I am ready because without the history and the acceptance of the history the Saturday nights go empty, the women lose their scent and the stench of fraud denies us any hope of ever understanding or sharing or belonging to this place and ground where the soil goes hot, the rivers run dry, the blood flows easily, the people move and the earth turns and comes back again right at our throats. (240)
According to Bowden, whatever happens to the environment on this Earth, we are all in it together. There is distinction, there is difference, but, once the alien beings among and with us are acknowledged, there is no longer any way to pretend that there is an absolute divide. This is not to say that Bowden does not acknowledge the senseless things that humans do. After all, *Trinity* is a history of destruction, named for the rise of the atomic bomb at a test site in the desert and its “house made of fire” (241). However, in acknowledging stupidity, Bowden also reveals nature through revealing the choices made about what is and is not important, allowing the rise of nature in the gaps.

**Works Cited**


