

Countering “the anesthesia of destruction”: Information and Pathos in the Work of J.M.G. Le Clézio, Barry Lopez, and Vandana Shiva

Scott Slovic

ABSTRACT

This article studies a type of numbness, a dulling of sensitivity that occurs when the human mind receives particular kinds of information concerning accidents, tragic events or large-scale calamities. It particularly explores the causes and the social and environmental results of this numbness. The latter has been called “the anesthesia of destruction” by Indian social and environmental activist Vandana Shiva, referring to the human tendency to turn off our feelings and become anesthetized by information about destruction. The research into this reaction, or lack of reaction, matters a great deal since how the information about these issues is presented to us, whether we are talking about human suffering or what is happening in the natural world, has everything to do with how we think and act in the world. The article uses Shiva’s descriptor of the feeling of indifference and numbness, “the anesthesia of destruction”, to examine stories in *The Round and Other Cold Hard Facts* by J.M.G. Le Clézio and *Light Action in the Caribbean: Stories* by Barry Lopez. These are literary examples from authors deeply involved in the effort to use fiction as a way of making readers think more seriously about social responsibility and the psychology of engagement.

Keywords: “the anesthesia of destruction”, information, suffering, responsibility, engagement

RESUMEN

Este artículo investiga un cierto tipo de adormecimiento emocional, la clase de sensibilidad tibia que tiene lugar cuando la mente humana recibe alguna información particular sobre accidentes, eventos trágicos o calamidades de gran escala. Específicamente explora las causas y las consecuencias sociales y ambientales de esta parálisis emocional. Esta última ha sido denominada “la anestesia de la destrucción” por la activista social y ambiental india Vandana Shiva y se refiere a la tendencia humana de desconectar nuestras emociones, quedar anestesiados por la información sobre la destrucción. Esta investigación sobre esta reacción, o falta de reacción, es importante ya que dependiendo de cómo se presenta esta información, sea sobre el sufrimiento humano o lo que sucede en el mundo natural, la manera en que pensamos y actuamos en el mundo se verá afectada directamente. El artículo utiliza el descriptor de estos sentimientos de indiferencia e inacción, “la anestesia de la destrucción” acuñado por Shiva, para analizar algunos cuentos de *The Round and Other Cold Hard Facts* de J.M.G. Le Clézio y *Light Action in the Caribbean: Stories* de Barry Lopez. Estos son ejemplos literarios de autores profundamente involucrados con el esfuerzo de usar la ficción como un medio para que los lectores piensen más detenidamente sobre la responsabilidad social y el compromiso psicológico.

Palabras clave: “la anestesia de la destrucción”, información, sufrimiento, responsabilidad, compromiso



Why does a certain numbness, a dulling insensitivity, occur when the human mind receives particular types of information and what are the social and environmental results of this numbness, this lack of feeling? At first glance, this might not seem to be a very “literary” question—or a question with clear social implications. But I would argue that our reaction to information is profoundly important in all social and environmental contexts, especially if these are situations that may call for engagement or action of some kind. If there is a problem, such as another person who might be injured in an accident or perhaps suffering from extreme poverty or hunger, and if we heard about this person, we may wish to help out. If the information is presented to us in certain ways, we might be more or less likely to be compelled to help. The same thing might be true in an environmental context. In the twenty-first century, we are constantly receiving information through the media about existing or potential environmental threats, ranging from global climate change to the status of certain kinds of wild animals and whether they should be protected or not. Here in Idaho, where I live, one of the major controversies is about wolves and whether they should be protected in the wild mountains in the middle of our state. But how the information about these issues is presented to us, whether we are talking about human suffering or what is happening in the natural world, has everything to do with how we think and act in the world.

The topic of information, communication, and audience response is very much a literary subject. My new book *Numbers and Nerves: Information, Emotion, and Meaning in a World of Data*, which I have written and edited with my father Paul Slovic, a distinguished psychologist, is a collection of scholarly articles and literary essays that study how the human mind responds to quantitative information—to numbers. We are particularly interested in what psychologist Robert Jay Lifton called “psychic numbing” in his prize-winning 1968 book *Death in Life*—this term refers to the tendency of the human mind to shut down, to become insensitive, when confronted with large-scale phenomena. Lifton developed his concept after World War II when he visited Hiroshima, Japan, and studied the psychological effects of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. But his concept also applies to the kind of information that all of us receive today through the news media and through other forms of communication, including literature, about what’s happening in the world. In 1995, he and Greg Mitchell wrote, “The tendency toward numbing can even extend to everyday forms of human interaction” (59). In other words, psychic numbing and its paralyzing effect on human action can occur even in ordinary situations if we are numbed by particular kinds of information—it is not a concept reserved for cataclysmic situations, such as the use of nuclear weapons.

For the book *Numbers and Nerves*, I have also interviewed several important writers and artists to ask them questions about their use of various communication strategies in order to overcome the numbing effects of numerical information and other desensitizing modes of communication. One of the people I interviewed was the Indian social and environmental activist and author Vandana Shiva. I traveled to New Delhi, India, in 2006 to talk with her. During our interview, she stated that information about social and environmental damage is likely to result in what she called “the anesthesia of destruction,” and this phrase—“anesthesia of destruction”—really stuck with me. In other words, when we receive bad news about certain kinds of problems, we—that is, human beings—have a tendency to turn off our feelings, to be anesthetized by the information about destruction. This tendency is a survival instinct, a way of not being excessively distracted by disturbing or scary information and perhaps a way of focusing on our own immediate survival. It may once have been a useful instinct, this kind of tunnel vision that resulted from being insensitive to the suffering of others, but in the

twenty-first century, when there are major problems occurring all over the world in both human and environmental contexts, it seems important for us to overcome our tendency to look away, to be insensitive to that which is not happening directly in front of our eyes. Along these lines, ecocritic Rob Nixon, a South African who now works in the United States at the University of Wisconsin, describes at great length the complex challenges we face in “apprehending” the slow, large-scale, and often invisible “violence” that occurs throughout the world—this is the focus of his 2011 book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. My 1992 book *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing* studies the psychological phenomenon of consciousness, or paying attention, as a central theme in the work of important environmental writers in the United States, such as Henry David Thoreau and Annie Dillard, showing how these and other writers focus on the habits of the human mind as well as on “nature” in the outside world. But recent ecocriticism, as in Nixon’s work, we see a focus not only on the perception, or the very imperceptibility, of natural phenomena immediately surrounding the human observer but on vast, planetary processes or on phenomena happening in distant regions of the world—a focus on “slow” phenomena that we, as individual human beings, cannot detect.

Literature itself serves as a way of challenging readers’ tendency to become insensitive and inactive in the face of barely perceptible violence in our daily lives. I would like to present a few specific literary examples from authors I believe are deeply involved in the effort to use fiction as a way of making readers think more deeply about social responsibility and the psychology of engagement. One of these writers is 2008 French Nobel prize-winner in literature, J.M.G. Le Clézio; the other is prominent American fiction writer and essayist Barry Lopez, who won the National Book Award for nonfiction in 1986 for his book *Arctic Dreams*. It may seem a little odd to compare such different authors here, but to do this kind of comparative work—using the psychology of sensitivity and insensitivity as a link—is one of the major trends in current ecocriticism. Ecocritic Patrick D. Murphy makes a strong argument about this in his chapter titled “Refining Through Redefining Our Sensibilities: Nature-Oriented Literature as an International and Multicultural Movement,” which appeared in his book *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature* in 2000. Murphy sees a problem with the narrow focus on a single ethnic or national literature and suggests that ecocritics should seek to place environmental texts in “an internationally relative and comparative framework” (58). One of the reasons for this is to show how authors engage with social and environmental issues and experiences that typically transcend national borders. Another reason is to demonstrate the universal habits and processes of the human mind—in other words, psychic numbing and the effort to use literature as a means of challenging this psychological tendency is a *transnational phenomenon*. This is the rationale for what I’m doing with Le Clézio and Lopez.

I will begin my discussion of fiction with Le Clézio’s short story collection *La ronde et autres fait divers*, which was published in French in 1982 and then published in English, with the title *The Round and Other Cold Hard Facts*, in 2002. This collection of eleven short stories begins with the title story, “The Round.” Not all of the stories are especially environmental, but a few of them are clearly about place or about how certain fictional characters understand their human identity in relation to geography. The issues of geographical identity tend to be related to the experience of exile—that is, what happens to our self-understanding when we go away from the places we once lived, either leaving voluntarily in order to pursue our lives or sometimes leaving because we are compelled to seek work in a new place, even though we did not want to leave our homes and our families. Two of the later stories in the collection, titled “Villa Aurora”

and “The Runner,” are profoundly moving tales about emotional connection to place and the suffering that occurs as a result of exile and, in one case, even the emotional suffering that occurs when one returns to a former home and sees how it is being changed. “The Round,” the title story, establishes a psychological pattern in the book, which is relevant to what comes in the later stories.

“The Round” is a story of two girls who are studying to be secretaries. It seems to be set in the southern French city of Nice, which is where the author spent part of his childhood. The two girls seem to be teenagers—old enough to have boyfriends and to be driving around the city on mopeds (small motorcycles). The girls, named Titi and Martine, are excited about joining other young boys and girls in a kind of moped gang, racing through the city streets, dodging the automobile traffic. We learn early in the story that Martine loves this particular experience. Le Clézio puts us in the mind of Martine early in the story, writing:

Now that she’s off on the moped, Martine no longer feels the fear in her body. Maybe the vibrations of the moped, the smell and warmth of the gas fumes have filled up all the empty places in her. Martine really loves riding mopeds, especially on a day like today, when the sun is shining brightly and the air isn’t chilly. She loves to slip through the automobiles, her face turned up a bit sideways to avoid breathing in the wind, and go fast! (5-6)

Throughout the early pages of the text, there is a repeated emphasis on some kind of fear that Martine has. Not a fear related to riding the mopeds, but a social fear—a fear and also perhaps an excitement about her interactions with the other young people. The fear seems to occur in her when she sees boys on the streets of the city. At one point, a few pages into the story, Le Clézio writes, “she understands that the world is waiting for something, that something has to happen” (5). We think it probably has something to do with Martine’s possibility of developing a relationship with the other young people mentioned earlier in the story or perhaps with one of the boys in particular. As the narrative continues, we learn that the youths have a kind of game that they engage in, a sort of dare-devil activity, where they race through the empty streets of the city toward a turnaround—what some people might call a “roundabout” or a “rotary.” This is what the title of the story, “The Round,” refers to.

The narrative describes a street: “Liberty Street is empty and white, with the sun high at its peak, crushing the shadows, the deserted sidewalks, the buildings with their windows like blank eyes, the cars slipping slowly along. How can everything be so calm, so far away?” (8). Then the next paragraph describes a woman waiting for a bus:

It’s all because of her, just her; the woman in the blue suit is waiting for the bus, not looking at the girls, a bit as if she were sleeping. Her face is red because she’s been walking in the sun, and the white blouse under her blue suit jacket clings to her skin. Her small eyes are set deeply in their sockets; they don’t see anything, or just barely, furtively, down at the end of the street, where the bus should be coming from. (8)

Then we learn that Martin “races the engine [of her moped], and the moped lunges forward on the pavement” (9). The following paragraph seems to digress and mentions a blue moving van:

Several blocks away, not far from the train station, the blue moving van is pulling slowly away, loaded with furniture and boxes. It’s an old truck that sits up high on its wheels, painted an ugly color of blue, that successive drivers have brutalized for over a million

miles, slamming on the brakes and grinding the gears into place. (9)

Le Clézio puts these elements, these actors, into motion: a woman waiting at a bus stop, two young girls racing through the seemingly empty streets on their mopeds, and an old, heavily laden truck lurching through the city, several blocks away. Titi is following Martine. There is a strange lack of emotion in describing the girls as they race through the streets toward “the round,” the turnaround point at the end of their route. It is as if the girls are the only people alive in the city. Le Clézio writes:

In the new buildings, behind the windows like so many lifeless eyes, are strangers who are barely alive, hidden by the membranes of their curtains, blinded by the pearly screens of their television sets. They don't see the cruel light or the sky; they don't hear the sharp cry of the mopeds that sound something like screams...

Inside the cells of their locked apartments, the adults don't know what goes on outside; they don't want to know who's going around in the empty streets, on the frenzied mopeds. (11)

There is a great emphasis here on dispassion, on an absence of emotion, on a failure of human sympathy or sensitivity. There is also a special emphasis on the parents of the girls—or just older people in general—not being aware of the activities and feelings of the young people. The girls continue racing toward the round. Titi passes Martine as they complete their race through the streets, and Martine, we learn, “feels a great emptiness deep inside of her, because now the round is finished, and she can't have that high feeling anymore” (12). Even this emptiness, though, is at least a *feeling*, a kind of emotional intensity—better than no feeling at all, the numbness of the people inside the buildings, unaware of the drama playing out on the streets.

A few lines later, the blue moving van “comes out of a side street, just like an animal, and its hood catches the moped [Martine's moped] up and smashes it to the ground in a terrific crash of metal and glass” (12-13). The language of Le Clézio's narrative is strikingly unemotional. It is clinical. The title of the book is *The Round and Other Cold Hard Facts*, and the final lines of the title story, in particular, are cold and hard. Here is how the author narrates the scene after the horrific accident, where the van strikes the girl on her moped:

Silence settles back down on the street, in the middle of the intersection. On the pavement, behind the blue truck, Martine's body is sprawled, flopped over on itself like a rag. There's no pain, not yet, as she lies there looking up at the sky, eyes wide, lips trembling slightly. Instead, an unbearably intense emptiness is slowly creeping over her as dark rivulets of blood trickle from her crushed legs. Lying on the pavement not far from her arm, as if someone had stupidly forgotten it there on the ground, is the black leather bag, with its gilt metal clasp glinting murderously. (13)

At first glance this might seem to have nothing to do with environmental literature or ecocriticism, but I would connect this fictional scene to Shiva's idea of the “anesthesia of destruction”—to the psychology of the human mind's response to violence or, rather, to the lack of response. This particular story, which uncannily combines rich narrative detail and an absence of emotional content, spurs us, as readers, to fill the emotional void with our own emotion. Narrative language inspires sympathy among readers—we simulate the action of stories in our imaginations, engaging with the actions of characters, whether fictional or real. When the narrative language is jarringly incompatible with the action of the story (as I would say is the case in this

story by Le Clézio), we readers feel compelled to provide the missing emotion. In the case of the title story of Le Clézio's book, there is actually a social dimension to the topic—the indifference of parents to their children and their children's emotional needs. "The Round" also sets into motion a motif that appears in other stories later in the collection, a few of which are much more explicitly environmental—or at least geographical.

Both "Villa Aurora" and "The Runner" explore the emotional meaning, the "pathos" you could say, of phenomena that may, on the surface, not seem to have clearly emotional implications. I will simply describe the overarching topics of the works and point toward what I take as their psychological ideas. "Villa Aurora" describes the process of urban development in an unnamed city in southern Europe—perhaps also the author's hometown of Nice. Villa Aurora is the name of an estate that the first-person narrator of the story visited as a child—a place where the narrator used to enjoy nature as a young person. We learn this when the speaker says, "I loved the birds [...] because they were low-flying blackbirds, hopping from tree to tree. They whistled funny, mocking tunes, perched on the topmost branches of the laurels or in the dark crowns of the araucaria [a kind of tree]" (85). The first five pages of the story or so describe the narrator's memory of Villa Aurora as a special place for childhood encounters with nature. After establishing the speaker's emotional attachment to this place, the story suggests that he has moved away and that this geographical distance has also resulted in a kind of rupture of his own identity. Le Clézio writes: "Where had the child in me gone? For years, he was even totally unaware of being cut off, struck with amnesia, forever banished to another world" (88). The speaker later returns, as a university student, to see this special place, but he finds that in his absence it has changed. The author writes:

Things were so different. The villas had disappeared, or else they had been repainted, enlarged, transformed. In places where there had once been gardens protected by high, moss-grown walls, there now towered vast, intensely white buildings of ten, eight, twelve stories on their grease-stained parking lots. (89-90)

The speaker takes on a sense of personal responsibility for allowing these changes to occur—small villas being torn down and replaced by large apartment complexes and other evidence of urban growth. He says, "I had just realized that in straying, in ceasing to keep my gaze intent upon my world, I had betrayed it, had abandoned it to its mutations. I had looked away, and meanwhile things had been able to change" (90). Obviously, when we look at things we care about in the world, we cannot necessarily forestall their change or destruction, but there is the sense in these lines of the story that attentiveness among observers might have some way, through politics or through sheer moral energy, of preventing destruction. Le Clézio's story shows the case of a beautiful place that has been destroyed, perhaps to some extent through inattention of those who loved this place. As in "The Round," we have in this short story an example of a kind of destruction that has occurred as a result of lack of attention among those who should have been attentive and engaged. This failure of attention, as articulated guiltily by the narrator, seems designed to instill in readers, too, a desire to be more attentive to that which we treasure in the world—places, people, and other phenomena.

Jumping ahead quickly, let me now write briefly about Le Clézio's story called "The Runner." The title refers to someone who runs, or traffics, human beings—workers—who are brought from Eastern Europe to Western Europe to perform physical labor for very little money. The story begins by focusing on a man who collects these

workers and transports them in the back of a truck from their home regions in impoverished areas of the East and drives them secretly, illegally, to places in the West where they can find work. Tartamella, “the runner,” is a tough, callous man, but he notices one particular worker named Milos who seems to be brooding and asks him, “What’s eating you?” (147). This means what’s wrong with you. The rest of the story explores what is bothering Milos, and it turns out that he feels a painful geographical dislocation, a loss of contact with his family and his home environment. It is so common to see workers and never to think about their inner lives and troubles. All of us must be prone to this indifference toward people who’ve been forced to leave their homes for one reason or another, but seldom do we ask, “What’s eating you?” I won’t go into great detail about the story here, but there are various passages where Milos’s invisibility is mentioned. He sees people in the West, but they don’t see him. Le Clézio writes:

...people look at his unshaven face, burnt from so much sun and cold, and his worn clothing, covered with cement dust.

But he stares at them almost avidly, as if he were trying to understand what made them so distant, so indifferent, as if they didn’t belong to the same world as he. There are young women who are so beautiful, with pristine faces haloed in blond or black hair, dressed like Amazons, swinging their hips slowly, slipping over the sidewalk like fairies. But they don’t see him; they go right past without looking at him ... (166)

People tend not to notice Milos or to realize the despair he feels as a nameless foreign worker. After he is paid, he resolves to make his way on foot back to his home country, and he begins the long and arduous journey. The story ends as Milos reaches the summit of a mountain while walking back toward his home. Still far away from home, he gazes in the direction of his family, his wife, and the story concludes with this sentence:

Despite the icy wind coming from the snowy peaks, he lies down on the edge of the cliff, eyes wide with fatigue, and stares off into the distance, as if somewhere out there, despite the time, despite the silence, Lena’s eyes would suddenly blink open under his steady gaze. (167)

The point here seems to be the illumination of the pathos, the inner emotional life, of a guest-worker, someone viewed by the people of the country in which he is working as a kind of machine, lacking in emotional depth. In this case, though, the pain of living in exile is vividly portrayed through the fictional narrative, putting pressure on us, as readers, to feel more sympathy toward wanderers and workers we may encounter in our own lives.

Sympathy, attachment, and knowing how to act appropriately. These are also essential psychological aspects of the two short stories by American author Barry Lopez that I will now discuss. In three of the short stories I’m using in this paper, two of Le Clézio’s and one of those by Lopez, we see a tremendous emphasis on singularities—one girl terribly injured when her moped is struck by the truck, one guest-worker yearning for home. And in Lopez’s story “The Deaf Girl,” a single young girl brutally attacked and left for dead.

In Lopez’s story, which appears in his collection *Light Action in the Caribbean*, published in 2000, there is a first-person narrator who is traveling alone through the American West. He is clearly an aesthete—the narrative focuses on his visual perception of the landscape, on the good meal he has eaten, on what he is reading. He is driving

around the countryside, running some kind of vague personal errand. He stops to spend the night in a small town in the state of Montana. A young girl walks by the man's hotel as he sits on the balcony reading a book, and she walks in a strange way, as if she is slightly off balance, probably because she is deaf. We learn that she has been injured in gang fighting and has moved with her family to this small town in order to be safe from such violence. But, strangely, a young man follows the girl when she walks to a secluded place, and he attacks her, beats her, and leaves her, expecting her to die. We do not see the attack in the narrative, which is presented mainly from the perspective of the traveler, who is simply sitting on the balcony of his hotel, reading a book. The girl survives the attack and walks back through the town, past the place where the narrator is sitting and calmly reading his book. The narrator is disturbed when he sees the injured girl walking along the road. Lopez writes:

I was not surprised when I saw a small figure walking the same path the boy had walked hours before. It was a continuation of a disturbance, one initiated by the boy's passing, and it was this that had really brought me out onto the porch. I soon saw that it was the girl, and I could tell that it was bad, the lopsided way that she advanced, sweeping a hand in front of her to locate obstruction. I sat rigid, a motionless spectator.

I would pick out little detail in the dimness, but when she drew near I saw plainly the dark welt of blood congealed like paint on her face and run out across her chest in her blouse. I didn't want to move my eyes, to deliberately examine her body, but I sensed her clothing was twisted, and one hand hung still and distorted. He had left her for dead, I thought. (65)

There is a strange passiveness in this language and in the ongoing narrative. The narrator/observer is deeply disturbed, but is impotent—unable to help. The injured girl stares at the narrator as she walks past, but Lopez writes: “I stood up, gesturing at my legs. ‘I haven't got any pants on here. I've got to get my pants’” (66). Clearly the narrator and we, the readers, are observing a kind of violence, or at least the aftermath of violence. The speaker in the story is powerless, though—he watches, he is fascinated, but he never leaves the porch to help the injured girl. The reader, though, feels a sense of outrage—a barely containable outrage. The absence of action on the part of the narrator is the trigger that inspires the reader's desire to engage.

I heard Lopez read this story to a group of 600 environmental activists at the 1999 Fire & Grit environmental conference organized by The Orion Society, a major American environmental organization. He clearly chose to present this story to the activists at the conference because he knew that it was a work of fiction that explores how narrative of inaction can inspire readers to care, to fill the void of the text where meaningful action should be present with our own surplus of activist zeal. Thinking back to Vandana Shiva's notion of the anesthesia of destruction, I would suggest that Lopez's combats such anesthesia by creating an emotional void in the story that tugs the reader's emotions. The fact that he is also describing only a single observer, a single villain (the boy who attacks the girl), and a single victim (the deaf girl) also maximizes the reader's emotional engagement with the narrative.

Finally, let me write a few words about the title story of Lopez's collection, which has the strange title *Light Action in the Caribbean*. This story describes two upper middle-class young Americans from Colorado who have so much money they imagine that they float above the earth, unsusceptible to social and natural reality. They feel they are insulated from danger because they have money. They are also, they seem to believe, insulated from the need to behave thoughtfully or responsibly. David and Libby, the young couple, travel to the Caribbean to go diving in

the sea. Most of the story is about their superficial behavior, their material possessions, and their money. They travel from Colorado to an unnamed location in the Caribbean. They enjoy food and flowers during their vacation. They hire a local guide, named Esteban, to take them out in a boat so that they can enjoy the sea in a purely aesthetic way. Lopez writes: “The passing streamers of brightly colored damselfish, of French grunts and sergeant majors, huge stingrays rising slowly, regally, from camouflage on the sand flats, the way tiny nudibranchs glistened like flower buds on the coral heads all made her light-headed with satisfaction” (138). There is no sense of ecological awareness or of the danger of being in the open sea. The young Americans convince Esteban to take them to an area in the sea not normally visited by divers. He warns them that this is a dangerous place, but they pay him extra money to take them anyway. Again, the young couple feels that with money they can insulate themselves from any danger. Suddenly, they see a small boat racing toward their boat. Here the language of Lopez’s story becomes especially interesting. A scene of extraordinary violence is presented, but in a cold, emotionless voice that is reminiscent of Le Clézio’s language in his story “The Round.” Lopez writes:

The shirtless man in madras shorts raised a .9 mm Glock and began spraying Esteban. The first bullet tore through his left triceps, the second, third, fourth, and fifth hit nothing, the sixth perforated his spleen, the seventh and eighth hit nothing, the ninth hit the console, sending electrical sparks up, the tenth went through his right palm, the next four went into the air, the fifteenth tore his left ear away, the sixteenth ricocheted off the sixth cervical vertebrae and drove down through his heart, exiting through his abdomen and lodging in his foot. The seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth went out over the water.

David watched Esteban shudder and fall like an imploded vase. (142)

The intended readers of this story are clearly educated Americans, perhaps people not entirely unlike the characters David and Libby, who end up being brutally attacked, killed, and robbed by the pirates who have shot their guide, Esteban. But first the American tourists are able to watch their guide being murdered, and they are able to learn, if only briefly, that the world can be a dangerous, brutal place—a Darwinian place. The brutality of this scene of destructive violence is strangely accentuated by the emotional vacancy of the language—by the *clinical* narrative style. There are, of course, many ways of interpreting the short story, and I would hesitate to argue that fiction or any works of literature must carry clear-cut “messages.” But it does seem to me that Lopez is saying something here about the implications of our being insensitive to our own true fragility and believing that we humans can ever be securely insulated from the dangers of the world. By using an anesthetized, clinical narrative vocabulary in this title story, it is as if Lopez has sought to spark a non-anesthetized, emotional response in his readers, not only to the fate of the fictional characters in the story, but to our own vulnerability, wherever we are in the world.

Another reading that occurs to me has to do with the doubleness, even the tripleness, of the fictional characters—David, Libby, and Esteban—who are killed in Lopez’s story. As psychologists have recently proven through many experimental studies, human emotional sensitivity is much greater when we receive information about singular phenomena—one place being destroyed, one animal in trouble, one starving child, one person being attacked. As soon as that one person or place becomes two or three, we feel less concerned or engaged. We feel a fading of compassion. By the time we find ourselves trying to feel something in response to news about ten suffering people—let alone 1,000 victims or a million—we can hardly feel anything at all. This human incapacity to resonate emotionally to large-scale destruction is a tremendous

problem as we try to determine how to respond individually and through government action to human suffering and to environmental destruction. It is simply hard to make people care about phenomena that occur on a very large scale.

In my brief analysis of these short stories in the context of Vandana Shiva's concern that writers somehow find a way to study and perhaps counter, or overcome, the anesthesia of destruction, I hope I've at least begun to shed light on how ecocritics—and literary scholars more generally—might look at literature in order to consider how ideas about psychology and communication can be more deeply understood, ideas that have the potential to be very important to practical issues faced by societies throughout the world.

Bibliography

- Le Clézio, J.M.G. *The Round and Other Cold Hard Facts*. 1982. Trans. C. Dickson. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2002. Print.
- Lifton, Robert Jay, and Greg Mitchell. "The Age of Numbing." *Technological Review* (August/September 1995): 58-59. Print.
- Lopez, Barry. *Light Action in the Caribbean: Stories*. New York: Vintage, 2000. Print.
- Murphy, Patrick D. *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2000. Print.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2011. Print.
- Slovic, Scott. "Countering 'the anesthesia of destruction': An Interview with Vandana Shiva." *Numbers and Nerves: Information, Emotion, and Meaning in a World of Data*. Ed. Scott Slovic and Paul Slovic. Corvallis: Oregon State UP, 2015. Print.
- . *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing: Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Barry Lopez*. Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 1992. Print.