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## Home Ground, by Barry Lopez

W. Kurt Stavenhagen  
*Syracuse University*

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*HOME GROUND.*

BARRY LOPEZ, EDITOR. TRINITY UP, 2006.

*Reviewed by W. Kurt Stavenhagen, Syracuse University*

*Home Ground* will serve those in the fields of natural history, language and literacy studies, and nature writing as a smartly conceived cultural lexicon of landscape and water formations. The compendium features a “Who’s Who” of nature writers and bestselling nonfiction authors, from Barry Lopez to Bill McKibben, from Barbara Kingsolver to Terry Tempest Williams. Each of the forty-five authors were given the task of surveying standard geographic and geology reference works, their individual experiences with place, and a plethora of literary sources in order to write for us brief and appropriated appellations of place. As such the lengthy work (396 pages of entries) offers a rich, if at times uneven survey of the American namesakes for place.

Given that it is not an individual author’s work, *Home Ground* lacks a unifying dialect or droll commentary—as in the vein of Ambrose Biercé’s *Devil’s Dictionary*. Yet what it lacks in dashes of brilliant quips, it makes up for in its mix of literary and geological nominatives. Most common are entries that feature accessible geological terms and citations to usages by American writers of renown. Scientific parlance seems premium; for example, the terms alluvial fan, archipelago, shoals, and groundwater are prominent entries given in technical terms. But literary usage also takes prominence. Patricia Hamp’s definition of abutment is typical of this mix. In her entry, she cites the professional fields that use the term, a geologically based definition, and its literary usage by Cormac McCarthy and Henry David Thoreau. It reads: “Often used in architecture to indicate the support pressure formed to sustain an arch or span by another force such as a pier or wall ... rooted in the French *abut*, which suggests a limit or the place where ends meet. She also cites Cormac McCarthy when he says, “As he came about the abutment and entered the gloom beneath the bridge three boys darted out the far side and clambered over the rocks and disappeared in the woods by the river” (3). Similarly, Robert Haas’ definition of horizon notes its technical meanings, again giving deference to geology, yet then extensively citing Zora Neal Hurston and Wallace Steven’s use of the term:

A true, astronomical, or celestial horizon in astronomy is the circle on the celestial sphere whose plane is at right angles to the visible horizon. In geology the horizon is the plane of stratified surface containing a particular series of fossils. In soil science, it is a layer of soil in a cross section of land. In literature it is, of course, often a symbol for opportunity, especially if it is out of reach. Here is Zora Neal Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: ‘Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board. For some they come with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher

turns his eyes away in resignation.' In the plural horizons can be sequences of days, as in this seascape form Wallace Stevens's 'The Idea of Order at Key West': Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped/On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres/Of sea and sky.' (181)

Besides this helpful literary and geological framework, the work also meets its stated purpose to provide the textured use of these terms by Americans—"how and why we use this language" with a progressive bias and penchant for the piquant (402). In their bibliographic notation, the editors point out that they encouraged authorial inflection; *Home Ground* succeeds in highlighting acts of social regress for which we can thank them. Terry Tempest Williams, for example, notes that the Uintah and Ouray Indian reservations feature hydrocarbon reservoirs "aggressively prospected" by industry (294). Similarly Barbara Kingsolver's definition of a tailings pile is the turning of "the Earth inside out by mining operations" as it "buries surrounding landscapes under pyramid-shaped mountains devoid of vegetation" (353).

Humor (both dark and light) and personification show how much of the land is an act of Western cultural appropriation. The entries under "t" alone show this uneasy mix and bias: "tuckamore" (Newfoundland term for coastal stands of stunted spruce and balsam fir; 372), "trembling prairie" (optical illusion of rising shimmer from wind passing over grass; 370), and "thank-you-ma'am"—the bump depression in a dirt or grave road in the country, especially at an intersection (358). Logophiles will find plenty to consider and appraise.

*Home Ground* beckons as a pleasurable read as well as helpful reference work for the ambling, literary-minded reader. Though I wish pronunciation guides for terms would have been provided (tsegi, anyone?!), etymology indulged more, and anthropomorphisms indulged a bit less, the work sets the table as a celebrative offering of musing authorial intent and as a record of American cultural namesakes for beloved and contested places.