

Does Nature Writing Successfully Breach the Nature-Culture Divide?

By Alayna Cole for EGL201 Reality Bites: An Exploration of Non-Fiction

Thoreau's 'Walking' and chapter three of Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* fail to dissolve barriers between nature and culture because of their desire to elevate humanity. These texts use faculties that are solely human, which creates inequity between nature and culture. Both texts rely on the cultural to describe the natural. Lastly, these texts demonstrate an inability to escape from anthropocentric preoccupation.

Language is a human faculty that cannot be used by nature, so the focus in Thoreau's 'Walking' and chapter three of Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* on language creates inequity between nature and culture. In 'Walking', the narrator nominates himself to use language on behalf of nature when he says 'I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness...for there are enough champions of civilization' (Thoreau 1997, p. 480). Nature does not have the agency to respond to what the narrator, as representative of human and culture, says on its behalf, and this creates inequity. Simmons (in Robinson 2000, p. 15) suggests that this aspiration to give 'voice' to nature explicitly demonstrates that recollections presented in nature writing are potentially distorted through the use of language. This marks the narrator as unreliable, and this unreliability is reinforced when the narrator of 'Walking' suggests his memory of events is not entirely intact when he says thoughts 'fade irrevocably out of my mind even now while I speak and endeavor [sic] to recall them, and recollect myself' (Thoreau 1997, p. 502). It is suggested that the narrator of *Arctic Dreams* is also unreliable in the introduction of the text when it is said that 'the mind, full of curiosity and analysis, disassembles a landscape and then reassembles the pieces' (Lopez 1987, p. xxii). This statement suggests that nature writing is not designed to create mimesis but rather to 'reassemble' memory and ideas through language; this creates doubt regarding the accuracy of the text, making the narrator unreliable. *Arctic Dreams* emphasises the use of language in describing nature and culture, which is exemplified in the quote 'anthropologists and biologists turn to the same words to describe [men and bears]' (Lopez 1987, p. 108). Using language to describe these two parties creates inequity between nature, represented as bears, and culture, represented as men, because bears cannot use language and therefore do not have the agency to respond. Using language and images that belong to the cultural domain to describe the natural creates inequity between nature and culture, and by creating this inequity these texts fail to dissolve the barriers between these two domains.

'Walking' and chapter three of *Arctic Dreams* rely on the cultural to describe the natural. These texts use cultural imagery to describe natural scenes and Lowell (in Newman 2003, p. 539) argues that this is due to humans being created out of civilisation and therefore being 'rooted in the material world'. This suggests that nature writing is filtered through ideas of culture, which contributes to the potential distortion of the recollections being presented. This filtering is evident in these texts through their reliance on cultural imagery to describe the natural. Hanley (2001, p. 66) suggests that the intention of Thoreau's *Walden*, a text with similar themes

to 'Walking', is to make humanity re-evaluate the line it has created to divide nature and culture. However, this is not achieved by 'Walking' because the text serves to reinforce current divisions between these domains through its reliance on one to describe the other. In 'Walking', 'Nature' is described as 'absolute freedom and wildness' (Thoreau 1997, p. 480). To describe 'wild and free', a simile is made to 'the sound of a bugle in a summer night...which by its wildness...reminds me of the cries emitted by wild beasts in their native forests' (Thoreau 1997, p. 497). Rather than just using 'wild beasts' to represent 'wild and free', the text instead relies on the image of the bugle. This demonstrates the text's reliance on the cultural to describe the natural, because the bugle is an instrument crafted by humans and the creation of music is part of human culture. *Arctic Dreams* also relies on culture to describe nature, and uses cultural similes to compare the heat given off by a female seal to a '200-watt bulb' and part of the seal's den to 'a sill' (Lopez 1987, p. 90). Kollin (2000, p. 69) believes these cultural similes suggest the text's aim to replace wilderness ideology with 'ways of seeing that understand the permeable nature of all environments'; however, this reliance on the cultural to describe the natural instead exemplifies the text's anthropocentric preoccupation. These texts' reliance on the cultural to describe the natural reinforces current divisions between nature and culture, elevating the human rather than breaching the divide between these domains, and demonstrates the anthropocentric preoccupation of these texts.

'Walking' and chapter three of *Arctic Dreams* demonstrate an inability to escape from anthropocentric preoccupation. Cheng (in Robinson 2000, p. 17) suggests 'Walking' is arguing that humankind is one of many natural kinds living an interrelated life on earth, but this is disproven by the text's anthropocentric focus on elevating the human. The text's anthropocentricity is highlighted when the narrator shows an unusual flower to the people in town and muses that 'they wondered as at a star dropped down' (Thoreau 1997, p. 503). This suggests that the beauty of a natural object cannot be considered beautiful until it is taken from its natural environment into a cultural environment and shown to other humans. The idea that it is necessary for humans to legitimise the discovery demonstrates the text's anthropocentricity. Furthermore, the quote 'Methinks we might elevate ourselves a little more. We might climb a tree, at least' explicitly suggests the narrator's desire not to integrate with nature but rather to elevate humanity above it (Thoreau 1997, p. 503). Another manifestation of this text's anthropocentricity is its references to colonisation. 'Walking' describes going 'westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure', which is a description of colonisation (Thoreau 1997, p. 488). The tone of voice used in this quote sustains the myth that colonisation, as was contributed to by travellers like Columbus who 'felt the westward tendency more strongly than any before', is a positive idea (Lifton 1998; Thoreau 1997, p. 489). This myth is retold in 'Walking' to 'describe a new social landscape and a new concept of identity' (Lifton 1998). While the text suggests travelling west is a way of seeking identity, in contrast history demonstrates that travelling west has led to imposing the established culture of the arriving party on the existing one through colonisation. The text's focus on colonial ideas highlights its anthropocentricity by suggesting that the culture of the humans travelling west is more important than the natural landscape they are entering, and therefore should be imposed on that landscape. These actions are also demonstrated by some of the humans described in *Arctic Dreams*. The narrator of *Arctic Dreams* states that Europeans who travelled to the Arctic 'took

to killing any polar bear they saw... with colonial indifference', but also sympathises with them, saying that they shot the bears whose landscape they were entering because they were 'thousands of miles from familiar surroundings, genuinely frightened, and perhaps strained by the grim conditions of shipboard life' (Lopez 1987, p. 111). By sympathising with the Europeans' inhumane treatment of the bears, the narrator is considering humans to be more important than bears and is demonstrating the anthropocentricity of the text. Furthermore, this text suggests that human interference is both the cause of and solution to the damaging industrial expansion in the Arctic, which highlights the anthropocentricity of the text (McFarland 2004). This text's intention to highlight 'the ways economic decisions in other parts of the world have a profound impact on this seemingly isolated and removed area', undermines its desire to integrate nature and culture, as it strengthens the barrier between the two by suggesting the progression of culture is damaging nature (Kollin 2000, p. 63). These texts focus on elevating the human above nature, which demonstrates their anthropocentric preoccupations, and because of this focus they fail in their desire to dissolve barriers between nature and culture.

Thoreau's 'Walking' and chapter three of Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* utilise faculties that are solely human, such as language, to give voice to nature, which creates inequity because nature does not have the agency to respond. Both texts rely on the cultural to describe the natural, and this reliance reinforces the nature-culture divide as it continues to demonstrate that these two domains are separate. Anthropocentricity is evident in these texts in their focus on elevating the human above nature. Due to their agenda to elevate the human, and therefore culture, above nature, these texts fail to breach the nature-culture divide.

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