

John Garcia
Thesis Proposal

The Uses of Sight in Nature Writing

Sight plays a primary role in the negotiation between humans and the natural world. That is to say, the “how” of the way we see things is intimately tied to both the epistemology of the object viewed as well as the subjectivity of the voyeur. Just as sight is a historically determined marker of both mind and self, so is our collective modernist framework of the term “nature” predicated upon a legacy of gazes that Michel Foucault in The Order of Things ties to Linnaean botany. Based upon scientific practices that privilege sight not for the possibility of discovery but for the recognition of pre-established forms and classifications, the eye is governed by the fundamental codes of culture that serve to color our view of the world while forming our perceptions of nature.

The focus of my project is to examine the way that sight shapes the representation of the landscape and of nature in two landmark texts of American nature writing: Annie Dillard’s Pilgrim at Tinker Creek and Loren Eiseley’s The Undiscovered Country. Starting with the phrase, the *uses of sight*, I intend to examine how these authors rhetorically explore vision in terms of ways of knowing and subjectivity. As such, my project is an ecocritical exploration of how sight functions within nature writing.

Chapter One will introduce my topic and situate it within the theoretical perspective of ecocriticism, which is concerned with the representation of nature in literature. Of special interest is what William Howarth identifies in “Some Principles of Ecocriticism” as the methodological emphasis on *deixis*, the ability of language to point to and locate specific entities in “space, time, and social context,” which is pertinent in that both deictic language and textual representations of sight point towards objects

within the text (80). Howarth sees a close tie between language and the study of nature; similarly, two major works of ecocriticism situate environmental literature as a challenge to perception: Lawrence Buell's The Environmental Imagination and Scott Slovic's Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing. My contribution to this conversation is to position sight as a key component of perception, one that plays an important role in the experience of nature as well as in its representation. As such, my introduction will also consider philosopher David Abram's The Spell of the Sensuous, in which he identifies a phenomenological tension between scientific discourse and the subjective experience of being-in and seeing nature.

Chapter Two begins my theoretical discussion of sight using Richard Rorty's Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Foucault's The Order of Things, and James Krasner's The Entangled Eye. The goal is to establish how these texts point towards a foundational bias towards the ocular metaphor in Western science and philosophy, nature writing being an heir to this tradition from its roots in botany and natural history. From Foucault's discussion of Linnaeus to Krasner's study of sight in Charles Darwin's scientific prose, a pattern emerges that shares the importance of the eye to early nature writers such as Emerson and Thoreau.

Chapter Three continues this discussion of scientific discourse and nature writing by examining the problems first posed by Martin Heidegger in "The Question Concerning Technology." How does our technologically-minded culture see and construct nature? Feminist theorist Donna Haraway confronts this problem in her study of primatology, Primate Visions; significantly, both Haraway and Heidegger are important theoretical inspirations for ecocritical works such as Gretchen Legler's article, "I Am a

Transparent Eyeball': The Politics of Vision in American Nature Writing," which discusses the technologies of sight in relation to Annie Dillard's prose.

Chapter Four takes a comparative approach to the nature writing of Eiseley and Dillard in order to demonstrate how sight mediates between language and culture for these two writers. Questions I am interested in: How does Eiseley's "scientific eye" contrast with Dillard's? In what way is sight represented in the texts while navigating the competing discourses of love and knowledge? In what way does sight figure into an interiorized landscape, a "nature" imbedded in the writer's mind through the use of the ocular metaphor? Are Eiseley and Dillard uniquely prejudiced towards sight, or is their preference indicative of a larger generic tendency?

In his essay "The Star Thrower," Eiseley's metaphor of himself as a skeletal "desiccated skull" plagued by a relentless inner eye becomes an allegorical representation of the hidden costs of the scientific gaze, a discursive lens that strips life from the world (68). Like Dillard, he negotiates the antagonistic themes of love and science through a myriad of perspectives and gazes. Additionally, Eiseley uses sight as a metaphor for an interiorized landscape, a mirror world of nature that bridges the historical gaps of human development through the atavistic vestiges of primitive man which remain lodged within the subconscious of the modern individual. Therefore, Eiseley's use of the ocular metaphor demonstrates how sight operates on many meaningful levels in nature writing.

For Dillard, seeing is both an expression of Emersonian love for the hidden delights in nature and a subjective manifestation of discursive scientific practices; in other words, her project of seeing navigates between a dialectic of unexpected

discoveries and scientific reaffirmations. In Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, her quasi-religious exploration of nature becomes a task of seeing that is inextricably linked to language.

“Seeing is of course very much a matter of verbalization,” she states –a pair of analogous processes that are very much determined by the social construction of what it means to see, to speak, and to know (33).

Chapter Five draws from ecocritical composition theory and shows how the activity of *seeing* plays a critical role in the discourses that order and construct our knowledge of nature and of writing. As composition theorist Randall Roorda argues, nature writing sits between the literary and the expository in a way that makes the genre critical to understanding the relationship between rhetorics and subjectivity. The product of these discourses, writing, and its subject, nature, are both entrenched in the challenge to see actively and perceptively.

Annotated Bibliography

Abram, David. The Spell of the Sensuous. New York: Vintage, 1996. Abram’s

philosophical study focuses upon the phenomenological experience of nature.

Abram situates science as being in tension with the everyday sensory experience of nature. Sight is discussed in relation to language and the reading process.

Abram notes that sight is *not* necessarily unified; as a product of two eyes, sight possesses an “originary openness of divergence,” and is by definition dialectical (125).

Buell, Lawrence. The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the

Formation of American Culture. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995. Highly regarded

as one of the most important book-length studies of nature writing. Focuses upon environmental perception and role of nature in American culture by surveying literary nonfiction from colonial writing (e.g. Crèvecoeur, Bartram), the Romantics, and on through contemporary nature writers.

Deitering, Cynthia. "The Postnatural Novel: Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the 1980s." The Ecocriticism Reader. Describes a "new way of seeing" in terms of Martin Heidegger's essay "The Question Concerning Technology." Deitering interprets technological sight as a post-industrial recognition of the landscape as a repository for consumption and waste.

Dillard, Annie. Pilgrim at Tinker Creek. New York: HarperCollins, 1974. Dillard's landmark meditation on the terrors and wonders of nature. Critics have been divided about the purpose of this nonfiction work; some have focused upon Dillard's role as pilgrim/mystic, while others appreciate the many strands of discourse embedded in the text, which blends elements from science, metaphysics, theology, and art. In many ways the text is also a feminist and poststructuralist update of the traditional nature writing of Thoreau, Leopold, and Muir. My analysis of this text is specifically focused upon the chapter entitled "Seeing."

The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology. Ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: U of Georgia Press, 1996. The single most comprehensive resource published on the theoretical perspective of ecocriticism. Like the science of ecology, one of ecocriticism's greatest assets is its interdisciplinarity; essays in this anthology draw from established schools of

critical theory such as feminism, Marxism, and poststructuralism for an informed discussion on the relationships between literature and environmental studies. Specific essays pertinent to my research receive their own entries in this bibliography.

Eiseley, Loren. The Unexpected Universe. San Diego: Harvest, 1969. Contains his famous essay “The Star Thrower.” Loren Eiseley was a renowned anthropologist, science educator, writer, and philosopher. The Unexpected Universe is his collection of essays dealing with the themes of desolation and renewal in the revolving ties between nature, science, and humanity. “The Star Thrower” weaves a narrative about Eiseley’s troubled experience with nature while blending allusions from Buddhist mythology, Charles Darwin’s writings, and Goethe’s *Faust*, among others.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Nature. Boston: James Munroe, 1849. The classic transcendentalist statement includes an important early articulation of the ocular metaphor in American letters. His first chapter (also entitled “Nature”) establishes the poet as the caretaker of a keen metaphorical sense of vision. In a famous passage, Emerson describes himself as a “transparent eye-ball.” The influence of Emerson’s essays upon contemporary nature writing is enormous and cannot be underestimated.

Evernden, Neil. The Social Creation of Nature. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992.

Evernden’s chapter “The Literal Landscape” discusses the influence of sight and visual images in the history of Western ideas about nature. Relates Richard Rorty’s concept of the ocular metaphor to Dutch painting as well as to English

empiricist science as embodied by Francis Bacon and the Royal Society.

Technologies of sight such as the *camera obscura* demonstrate how Western culture's "preponderantly visual understanding of reality" is a product of the philosophical frameworks that Rorty deconstructs in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.

Foucault, Michel. The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences. New York: Vintage, 1970. In the chapter "Classifying," Foucault historicizes sight in relation to the emergence of natural history as a scientific discipline. Sight (as a standardized set of operations) ensures the empirical basis of scientific knowledge; the discursive uses of sight involved the use of the microscope with the goal of maintaining the stability of "specific visible forms from generation to generation" (133). Early botanists and natural historians such as Carolus Linnaeus established an ordered system that remains with us in the form of a stable vocabulary of names and terms to describe nature. Furthermore, Foucault ties sight to language and the eye to discourse by demonstrating how natural history becomes charged with filling the gap between "things and words" (129-131).

Haraway, Donna. Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science. New York: Routledge, 1989. This groundbreaking feminist study of primatology is a key text in considering the role of love, power, and science in the constructions of nature in the twentieth century. Haraway's examples of primate laboratory practices documents how sight can be used towards the discursive organization of knowledge. Additionally, primates represent a border region between humanity and nonhuman nature, and as such, illustrate Latour's theory of

“quasi-objects” (see below) –a significant complication of a traditional dichotomy; therefore, primates become emblematic of these border regions through their representation by science (a social practice that mediates between culture and nature).

Heidegger, Martin. “The Question Concerning Technology.” Basic Writings. Ed. David Farrell Krell. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993. This influential philosophical investigation into the essence of technology implicates modern science as holding nature captive to its capricious demands. In the question of technology, Heidegger sees an idea (*techne*) that long precedes the scientific revolution. Technology becomes an instrumental view of the world; one that produces rhetorical problems that are only solved by more technology. Heidegger finds solace in art (*poiesis*) which confronts technology. Some ecocritics see Heidegger’s second state of technology, “causality,” as a new way of seeing nature as a “standing reserve” or available resource bereft of other intrinsic values (322).

Howarth, William. “Some Principles of Ecocriticism.” The Ecocriticism Reader. Outlines the theoretical perspective of ecocriticism as an interdisciplinary blend of ecology, ethics, language, and criticism. Discusses the history of ecology *as a language*: Linnaean taxonomy (a static system of names/nouns) giving way to Darwin’s theory of evolution (attaching verbs to allow for change in species), with Mendelian genetics providing syntax in terms of a code for reproduction. Howarth’s discussion of language involves ecocriticism’s emphasis on deixis. A helpful bibliography is included which surveys the breadth of ecocritical scholarship.

Jarvella, Robert J. and Wolfgang Klein. Speech, Place, and Action: Studies of Deixis and Related Topics. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1982. A collection of essays dealing with the psycholinguistic study of deixis. Of particular interest is are two chapters: Karl Buhler's "The Deictic Field of Language and Deictic Words," which discusses how sight is implicated in verbal deixis; John Lyons' "Deixis and Subjectivity: *Loquor, ergo sum?*" touches upon phenomenology and the role of subjectivity in determining linguistic choices. This book serves as a resource for the theoretical underpinnings of ecocriticism (see Howarth); just as ecology situates organisms in a web of relationships, the study of deixis situates language-in-context.

Keller, Evelyn Fox and Christine R. Grontkowski. "The Mind's Eye." Feminism and Science. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996. Casts the prejudice towards the visual in Western thought as indicative of a distinctively "male logic" (187). A short, concise feminist analysis of the history of the ocular metaphor in Western epistemology.

Krasner, James. The Entangled Eye: Visual Perception and the Representation of Nature in Post-Darwinian Narrative. New York: Oxford UP, 1992. The chapter "A Chaos of Delight: Perception and Illusion in Darwin's Scientific Writing" discusses the shift in scientific writing from the 18th century view of nature as a mechanism to Charles Darwin's "revolutionary contribution to nineteenth-century scientific prose" (35). As an important prose stylist of nature, Darwin's writing demonstrates how the contribution of evolution to the history of science changes the representation of nature while still retaining the privilege of sight as a means

of reportage.

Latour, Bruno. We Have Never Been Modern. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge:

Harvard UP, 1993. Latour argues that modernity depends upon the distinction drawn between culture and nonhuman nature. Science becomes charged with the task of analyzing and representing nature, while culture is studied by the social sciences. At the same time, the nature/culture split produces “quasi-objects,” liminal entities that move between and connect the domains of nature, society, language, and general “Being.”

Phillipa, Dana. “Is Nature Necessary?” The Ecocriticism Reader. This essay bridges the gap between modernist and postmodernist views of nature by turning to Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology.” Sight is implicated in the social and natural re-organization that is represented in the material differences demonstrated by Phillipa’s example of fishing: Ernest Hemingway’s depiction of Nick Adams in the short story “Big Two-Hearted River” contrasts drastically with the sport fishing described by Carl Hiassen in his novel Double Whammy.

Heidegger’s “standing reserve” is a way of *seeing* nature that implies a fundamental shift away from a “romantic, prelapsarian relationship with it” (218).

Reimer, Margaret Loewen. “The Dialectical Vision of Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker*

Creek.” Critique. 24 (1983) : 182-191. Situates Dillard’s uses of sight as a dialectic between beauty and horror in nature. Reimer argues that Dillard’s project of seeing yields opposite and contradictory conclusions throughout the text.

Furthermore, she also discusses the religious themes of *Pilgrim* in terms of vision, and like David Abram’s dialectic of sight, Reimer notes how Dillard sustains

metaphysical and natural contradictions “within a single vision” (190).

Roorda, Randall. “Nature/Writing: Literature, Ecology, and Composition.” JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory. 17.3 (1997) : 401-414. This essay considers how nature writing functions as a genre; as literary nonfiction, it blurs the line between literature and “realistic” writing just as it freely borrows from many discourse communities: “Works called nature writing may be kin to hard science or cousins to spiritual exercises, may be field guides or farm journals, camping lore, sagas of exploration, or metaphysical speculation” (404). In his two articles, Roorda also discusses how nature writing also blurs the line between readers and writers (see next entry).

---. “Sites and Senses of Writing in Nature.” College English. 59.4 (1997) : 385-407. This essay continues Roorda’s discussion of nature writing by relating the composing process to the primary occupations of the genre’s practitioners. Roorda contrasts scientist/nature writers (e.g. Eiseley) with Dillard, who defines herself exclusively as a writer. Roorda links Dillard’s self-definition to her emphasis on situating place (the “scene of writing”) (391). Constructing the scene depends on *seeing*, in the sense that material changes to the composing process enact “enabling conditions” or conceptual shifts where technological improvements to sight (e.g. microscopes, binoculars, and eyeglasses) contribute to the scenes of nature writing (393-394). Hence the writing process can be “narrativized” with sight playing a key mediating role in the construction of nature-based texts.

Rorty, Richard. Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979.

Rorty identifies the prejudice in Western constructs of knowledge towards

foundationalism and the ocular metaphor. Beginning in Descartes, Locke, and Kant, the history of modern philosophy becomes the task of polishing a mirror: this mirror (Rorty's metaphor for the mind) representing the natural world, with knowledge being the accuracy of these reflections, and the act of polishing being philosophy's investigation of the mind and the nature of knowledge. Rorty advocates social and linguistic turns in the theory of knowledge –the recognition that the mind is historically, materially, and socially constructed by determining factors such as the ocular metaphor.

Slovic, Scott. Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing: Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Barry Lopez. Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 1992. This ecocritical study of five major nature writers focuses upon the link between the depiction of external nature and the internal psychology of each writer. Slovic's term, "awareness," corresponds in many respects to my focus on sight and its uses.

Worster, Donald. Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977. A survey of the evolution of ecology as a scientific discipline. Worster devotes substantial space to important figures such as Carolus Linnaeus, Henry David Thoreau, and Charles Darwin. Worster shows how the history of the term ecology begins long before its official coinage in the 19th century. Covers ecological ideas from early modern Europe on into the twentieth century.