

## Genre and the question of non-fiction

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Environmental non-fiction in the tradition of Thoreau remains a major if hardly exclusive concern of twenty-first-century ecocriticism. To open any issue of *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, the journal of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, is to still find at least as many studies of creative non-fiction as of the novel and poetry. More than in elements of romantic politics, it is in questions of genre that environmental non-fiction challenges the agenda of literary studies. It does not so much 'question the canon' of received literature as address presuppositions that are arguably deeper than choices as to which specific literary texts 'belong in the canon' or not. These concern the hierarchy of genres of writing. Robert L. Root writes:

For a long time introductory literature courses and creative writing programs have divided literature into three genres – fiction, poetry, and drama. Although nonfiction as a literary form has been around for a very long time, in creative writing communities it is often seen as a vehicle for the discussion of fiction and poetry rather than an equivalent artistic outlet.<sup>1</sup>

Robert Root's suggested name for creative non-fiction, the 'fourth genre' (247), never caught on. The lack of status enjoyed by explicit non-fiction, though a form as old as Herodotus, reflects perhaps the continuing but anachronistic power of the romantic idealisation of creativity in relation to the other genres.

Experimentation with genre characterises environmental writing. It also extends to the mode in which ecocritics may present their work. Ecocritics usually publish in the standard form of the academic article, but some also imitate the travelogue, the essay, the natural historian's notebook or the explorer's diary, or use the experimental form known as 'narrative scholarship' (see Chapter 17 below). Distinctions between the critical and the creative, primary and secondary text, may be unstable. Barry Lopez's *Of Wolves and Men* (1978) is clearly both at once.<sup>2</sup> Terry Tempest Williams's *Desert Quartet: An Erotic Landscape* performs a kind of erotic engagement with desert places, questioning the cerebral mode of the meditative essay.<sup>3</sup>

### 'You don't make it up'<sup>4</sup>

As we have already seen, a common literary form for environmental or nature writing is the literary essay, often in the form of a first-person meditation.<sup>5</sup> The essay offers freedom from the constraints of stricter kinds of academic or journalistic article, and has sometimes been understood as a kind of 'antigenre'. Theodor W. Adorno saw the essay as an essentially anti-methodical approach to knowledge, one not engaged with 'the game of organized science... [or striving] for closed, deductive or inductive, construction'.<sup>6</sup> If genres, including what are sometimes called subgenres or modes, function 'like a code of behaviour established between the author and... reader' (Heather Dubrow),<sup>7</sup> then the essay form suits the often perplexingly interdisciplinary nature of environmental issues. Its freedom can embrace material from diverse sources that would not be admitted in a scientific paper or a piece of historical research, taking on the anecdotal, the impressionistic, the polemical and so on. It shares with forms like the journal or travelogue a seeming openness to the contingency of fact, as opposed to the cognitive closure of more 'finished' writing. On the other hand, this very expansiveness can also render the essay rather relaxed or lightweight in impression.

An excellent example of such issues is Barry Lopez's *Of Wolves and Men*. Overall, it is hard to say whether *Of Wolves and Men* is better described as a long essay, a series of essays or a miscellany of mixed genres. Lopez offers readings of human societies and their condition through the test of their attitude to wolves. To offer an overview of western history with the wolf as its focal point is bizarre and provocative, though the essayistic mode can allow the scholarship to be lax at times.<sup>8</sup> Lopez surveys images of the wolf in literature, folklore, fairy-tale, Greek mythology and so forth. At the same time, such familiar historical work is framed by passages of natural history, travelogue

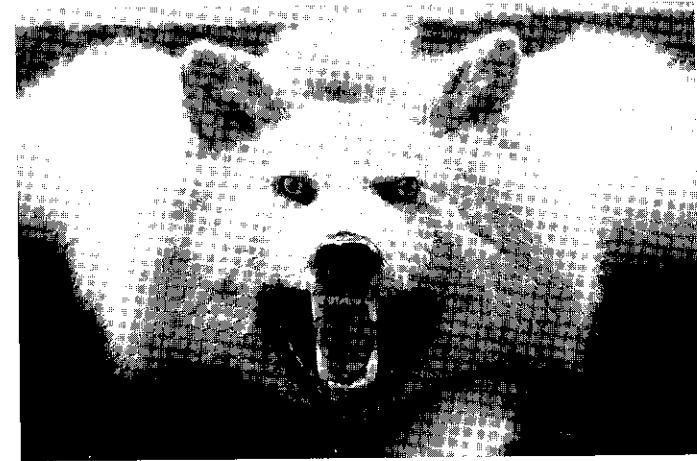


Figure 4 Wolfskin rug (Nicmac)

and by anecdotes of wolf behaviour, some factual and some more speculative. A section on the constellation 'Lupus' (the Latin for wolf) is even a kind of prose poem. In a Japanese context, Ishumure Michiko's *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* (1972) is similarly transgressive of genre, engaging the horrific effects of mercury pollution through a mix of non-fiction, mythology, journalism, autobiography and storytelling.<sup>9</sup>

In Lopez one effect of such strategies is that, viewed from such varied perspectives, the term 'wolf' becomes defamiliarized and displaced from its formerly negative cultural senses, with the effect of rendering huge amounts of cultural and historical material the record of western humanity's hatred, terror, vilification and murderous cruelty, all of which cries out for further investigation or even expiation. 'We are forced to a larger question: when a man cocked a rifle and aimed at a wolf's head, what was he trying to kill?' (138) If all human societies define themselves in some basic respects through how they live a human-animal distinction, then Lopez's histories of wolf extermination in America already pose questions for modern American identity. 'Dead wolves were what Manifest Destiny cost' (184). One image – of helpless victims being shot from a helicopter – still resonates as an emblem of US imperialism.

Such environmental non-fiction is usually defined by distinct ethical as well as formal expectations. Crudely speaking, since the text is engaged with the factual in some sense, there is a corresponding ethic of truthfulness. Lynn Bloom also argues:

Because writers of creative nonfiction are dealing with versions of the truth, they – perhaps more consistently than writers in fictive genres – have a perceptible ethical obligation to question authority, to look deep beneath the surface, and an aesthetic obligation to render their versions of reality with sufficient power to compel readers' belief.<sup>10</sup>

Hence writing like Lopez's will draw authority from modes of discourse taken as more directly representational, such as historical or biographical narrative and, to an increasing degree, scientific papers and reports. The strength of the implicit contract on truth-telling between reader and author emerges when someone breaks it, as in the peculiar controversy that emerged on the ASLE email list when it emerged that some striking details of natural history reported as personal observations in Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) were actually second-hand, from the reports of others.<sup>11</sup>

### Fiction or non-fiction?

As this weird controversy showed, readers of environmentalist non-fiction make a strong ethical investment in the written effect, necessarily carefully produced, of immediate experience. This creates a peculiar uncertainty about the status of literariness and artifice in such work. Roorda traces in the US environmentalist tradition an ambivalence about portraying the act of writing itself or acknowledging that the narrating figure, depicted as out in the wilds, is actually a professional writer. Annie Dillard is unusual here in foregrounding her status. Other writers tend to downplay writing as an implicit intrusion of artifice into the sustained illusion of immediate observation, of something supposedly recorded in a 'cabin', as mere 'sketches' or 'notes' or Wendell Berry's bizarre goal, 'why not write and live at the same time?'<sup>12</sup>

Such difficulties with literariness inform some reactions against too exclusive a critical focus on environmentalist non-fiction. Two issues stand out. The first, to be discussed later, is the association of the major tradition of environmental non-fiction with the specific culture of the (usually) white and privileged. The second is the question of fiction itself, and the cultural and intellectual assumptions inherent in some conceptions of non-fiction. In his *Further Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature* (2000), Patrick D. Murphy urged ecocritics to move beyond too exclusive a focus on non-fiction. One reason is that the very concept of non-fiction is evidently fragile and even undecidable: how much adding of second-hand material, embellishment, shaping, rewriting and so on will lead people to regard a work as fictional rather than non-fiction? Is not *Walden*, for instance, more honestly called 'fiction', since

Thoreau recast and revised his own experience so much? Such questions, Murphy fears, can only lead into 'a dimly perceived swamp of presuppositions, biases, and unstated agenda'.<sup>13</sup> His major point is that the stress on non-fiction had led many ecocritics to neglect a vast body of 'nature-oriented literature' in other forms. Does not Kiana Davenport's *Shark Dialogues* (1995), for instance, have a great deal to say about the environmental degradation of Hawaii, while also being a fictional novel? Likewise, why neglect science fiction writers like Ursula Le Guin and William Gibson, who invent hypothetical scenarios depicting various 'ecosystems and human interaction with such systems' (41). Murphy concludes, 'the really salient feature of an environmental literary work may be its impact on the reader's point of view, which can be accomplished through fictional stories as well as nonfictional ones' (52).

### An aesthetic consumerism

A further question for environmental non-fiction is this. If the pleasure that readers take in a piece of nature writing is not at least partly explicable in terms of some genuine relation to actual things, as opposed to the consumption of a performance of language, then the moral basis for celebrating such texts is compromised. Some argue that the political and ethical engagements of environmentalist writing are indeed negated or overridden by the way it serves its readership as a source of armchair aesthetic consumerism. 'Consumerism' here means not literal ingestion but the basic stance towards experience as a stock of procurable sensations to be tried and savoured, an attitude that arguably emerged in the Romantic period. Timothy Morton writes:

To be a consumerist, you don't have to consume anything, just contemplate the *idea* of consuming. Consumerism raised to the highest power is free-floating identity, or identity in process. This is a specifically *Romantic consumerism*. Transformative experiences are valued, such as those derived from drugs, or from intense experiences, such as Wordsworth's 'spots of time', traumas that nudge the self out of its circularity and force it to circulate around something new.<sup>14</sup>

Dana Phillips criticises Lopez and others for offering 'evocations' whose main purpose is a dubious escape into a kind of heightened experience.<sup>15</sup> Both Phillips and Morton are replaying here some of the issues of the so-called 'Nature Fakers' controversy of the early twentieth century. John Burroughs, Theodore Roosevelt and others had attacked the sentimental escapism and factual inaccuracy of much of the popular nature writing of the time, its

valuing things 'more for the literary effects we can get out of them than for themselves'.<sup>16</sup> The passages of Henry Williamson quoted earlier are obviously consumerism of this kind.

So what kind of writing is this, from *Of Wolves and Men*?

Wolves are extraordinary animals. In the winter of 1976 an aerial hunter surprised ten gray wolves travelling on a ridge in the Alaska Range. There was nowhere for the animals to escape to and the gunner shot nine quickly. The tenth had broken for the tip of a spur running off the ridge. The hunter knew the spur ended at an abrupt vertical drop of about three hundred feet and he followed, curious to see what the wolf would do. Without hesitation the wolf sailed off the spur, fell the three hundred feet into a snow bank, and came up running in an explosion of powder. 3

The element of aesthetic spectacle is undeniable in such a passage, but it serves a sense of outrage. Critics like Phillips might reply that the new celebration of the wolf is still offering a form of consumerist sublime, a so-called 'great wildlife spectacle' made possible by the long closure of the frontier. In that respect, the cultural space formed for the wolf in Lopez's book would be equivalent to that of a safely controlled national park, like Yellowstone, where grey wolves were controversially reintroduced in 1995. Nature writing, on such a reading, could not help being a symptomatic product of the very situation against which it also protests, the wilderness tamed.

Lopez, however, thinks that a form of nature writing 'will not only one day produce a major and lasting body of American literature, but might provide the foundation for a reorganization of American political life'.<sup>17</sup> These ambitions obviously go a long way beyond the belletrist essay and any implicit consumerism. Lopez's engagement with a plurality of genres may already have the force of an argument here: that there is no privileged genre that can re-present the non-human. Lopez has also chosen to study a creature whose implication in human cultures in the Northern Hemisphere is so forceful as to challenge the possibility of objective study: 'There is no proper name for all this. It is one long haunting story of the human psyche wrestling with the wolf, alternately attracted to it and repelled by it' (206). The human engagement with wolves has always been partly aesthetic, in ways seemingly too overdetermined to be neutralised by the accumulation of more natural historical knowledge. The wolf remains impossible to disengage from an ambivalent animal aesthetic – even a supposedly objective study could be another way of evading the direct challenge conveyed in the stare of a wolf (registered better perhaps in a myth or fairy tale?). Mixed genre writing here foregrounds both incompatible modes of

thinking about wolves and the refusal of the creature itself to be reducible (204): 'No one – not biologists, not Eskimos, not backwoods hunters, not naturalist writers – knows why wolves do what they do . . . To be rigorous about wolves – you might as well expect rigor of clouds' (4). Thus there are many places where Lopez's narratives draw back, qualifying an observer's assumption, for instance, that there is any 'single-minded strategy' in a wolf hunt's driving prey into the deeper snow (61), or questioning that late-capitalist mindset which satisfies itself with seeing everything in wolf behaviours in terms of 'dominance' hierarchies, status and territory (33, 292–3). We have 'analyzed their hunting behavior in human terms, and none of it is worth more than the metaphor it's couched in' (63).

Do other questions about consumerism remain? Consider the evocative/poetic kind of nature writing practised by Gretel Ehrlich. Ehrlich's ecofeminist writing foregrounds its author's own experience and impressions in a deliberate refusal of the stance of impersonal authority, foregrounding instead a sensuous, bodily interaction with natural forms. Her essay, 'The Solace of Open Spaces' concerns space both literarily, as the sparsely populated expanses of Wyoming, and as the psychological 'space' encountered there. Telling social detail is interspersed with Ehrlich's own version of that risky element of 'fine writing' often found in essays on landscape:

Spring weather is capricious and mean. It snows, then blisters with heat. There have been tornadoes. They lay their elephant trunks out in the sage until they find houses, then slurp everything up and leave. I've noticed that melting snow banks hiss and rot, then drip into calm pools where ducklings hatch and livestock, being trailed to summer range, drink. With the ice cover gone, rivers churn a milkshake brown, taking culverts and small bridges with them. Water in such an arid place (the average annual rainfall where I live is less than eight inches) is like blood. It festoons drab land with green veins . . . 7

Ehrlich is clearly striving to refresh a certain kind of nature writing with her slightly unusual imagery – snow 'rots' . . . 'elephant trunks', the images of ingestion, 'drink', 'milkshake', 'slurp'. But there is also a quandary implicit here: the greater Ehrlich's success in evoking specific natural effects by surprising language and rhetorical skill, the more the result may risk seeming a virtuoso verbal exercise, 'aesthetic' in a limited sense alone.

Need such foregrounding of language and rhetorical technique in this kind of non-fiction always be liable to seem consumerist, blunting its ethical challenge? Much ecocriticism evades questions of literariness, content with a largely thematic focus on a text's subject matter. Nevertheless, Thoreau's practice of

literary language as making 'wild' of the commonplace kept its force by implicating major philosophical and political questions – about identity, property, anthropocentric concepts of what is 'important', the social bond, and so on. Lopez achieves the same effect by juxtaposing various genres and modes of knowledge. Ehrlich's kind of defamiliarisation, however, when without this broader scope, risks sometimes drifting towards the status of a linguistic chocolate box.

### A reading: genres and the projection of animal subjectivity

Eileen Crist's study of genre in depictions of animals, *Images of Animals*,<sup>18</sup> demonstrates how prior decisions about modes of language and presentation project totally opposed conceptions of non-human life. In fact, it seems impossible even to begin discussing animal life without already having taken some major decisions simply through one's choice of language or genre. A choice of modes of language can decide in advance issues as momentous as whether killing a non-human animal is akin to murder or more like turning off a switch. Among the kinds of texts Crist studies are those that clearly belong to the genre of natural history and others that belong to classical ethology.

For natural history, Crist uses the example of an early twentieth-century study by George and Elizabeth Peckham on a species of wasp (*Sphex ichneumonea*), the 'golden digger'. This is how they verbalise their observations of a female wasp:

she came out and walked slowly about in front of her nest and all around it. Then she rose and circled just above it, gradually widening her flight, now going further afield and now flying in and out among the plants and bushes in the immediate vicinity. The detailed survey of every little object near her nest was remarkable; and not until her tour of observation had carried her five times entirely round the spot did she appear satisfied and fly away. All her actions showed that she was studying the locality and getting her bearings before departure.

Crist, 64

The passage forms a narrative. It places the animal, a 'she' not an 'it', within a recognised sequence of events whose coherence is derived from the fact that they are all rendered as purposeful for the wasp – the insect anticipates its need to return to and locate the nest. The function of narrative here may be familiar to literary critics, as in say E. M. Forster's famous contrast of a

mere verbal series of events, 'the King died and then the Queen died', with a minimal narrative, 'the King died and then the Queen died of grief'.<sup>19</sup> Through narrative the animal is posited as the author of various actions, engaged in them meaningfully and perhaps consciously, with some minimal sense of anticipation and even planning. The language can also be said to project a 'life world' for the wasp in the sense of a surrounding environment of meanings, dangers and opportunities the insect is able to read.

The Peckhams' use of narrative to make the wasp intelligible has some links that are weaker than others. In another passage the wasp is described as flying off in order – it is supposed – to hunt. Its return without prey is then interpreted to entail not a questioning of the original assumption but the supposed fact that no prey was found (Crist, 66). When the wasp gives only a cursory survey of the nest before flying away, the Peckhams infer an intention to return more quickly. One question is: how far is the use of narrative here – its sequence of goal-oriented action – projecting things upon the insect that might not be there?<sup>20</sup> Roorda surmises that the mere placement of an animal in a narrative already makes it 'human'.<sup>21</sup>

Much literary nature writing often employs narrative in the same way, interpreting animal behaviour as a purposeful whole governed from the first by meaning and foresight. With creatures more complex than the digger wasp, this may seem less problematic. The following passage from Lopez's *Of Wolves and Men* exploits narrative structure by withholding an overall interpretation of what is observed till the very last sentence:

I recall how one Alaska evening, the sun still bright at 11:30 p.m., we watched three wolves slip over the flanks of a hill in the Brooks Range like rafts dipping over riffles on a river. Sunlight shattered on a melt pond ahead of them. Spotting some pintail ducks there, the wolves quickly flattened out in the blueberries and heather. They squirmed slowly toward the water. At a distance of fifty feet they popped in the air like corks and charged the ducks. The pintails exploded skyward in a brilliant confusion of pounding wings, bounding wolves, and sheets of sunburst water. Breast feathers from their chests hung almost motionless in midair. They got away. The wolves cavorted in the pond, lapped some water, and were gone. It was all a game. 37

The twist in the last sentence is almost like a short story with a 'trick ending'. It imbues the whole scene retrospectively with a 'higher' level of purposive awareness and freedom of choice than any earlier assumption that the wolves must be hunting the ducks.

Crist contrasts her extracts from natural history with passages of prose from classical ethology. They are glaringly different. Here the animal's behaviour is

projected as various kinds of physiological event triggered by stimuli in the environment. Crist quotes Nikolaas Tinbergen's study of a species of water beetle:

The carnivorous water beetle *Dytiscus marginalis*, which has perfectly developed compound eyes . . . *does not react* at all to visual stimuli when capturing prey, e.g. a tadpole. A moving prey in a glass tube never *releases* nor *guides* any reaction. The beetle's feeding response *is released* by chemical and tactile stimuli exclusively; for instance, a watery meat extract promptly *forces it* to hunt and to capture every solid object it touches.

Crist's emphasis, 109

This beetle is clearly not the agent of a coherent and purposive sequence of actions carried through from start to finish. It is the passive recipient of a series of atomistic stimuli, each separately releasing some instinctual form of behaviour. The insect is not projected as any form of meaning-possessing subjectivity: each stimulus could in principle be directed at a different *Dytiscus marginalis* and produce the same result. There is no need to posit a continuous underling agent 'to whom' these things happen. The behaviour is a series of stimulus response events. Such language, Crist writes, projects a 'mechanomorphic' understanding of animal life, one that sees the creature as essentially a kind of machine. Major, imponderable questions arise. Is such ethology doing violence to the beetle in depriving it of aim and intents, or, contrariwise, might some even claim that the wolves' supposed game with the ducks was wholly or in part a projection of Lopez's mode of language? What is the 'literal' language for describing the behaviour of an animal? In sum, far more than modes of language are at issue in the question of where one draws the line between fiction and non-fiction in what Lopez and others write.

### Second quandary: fiction or non-fiction?

In the following piece of prose Mark Cocker offers an account of the flower of a variety of *Arum* (*Arum maculatum*) also known in Britain as the Cuckoo Pint. Two questions suggest themselves, one of which will be left till the end. The first is: in what ways would this passage lose in effect, quality and interest if no such plant existed and Cocker had invented the whole thing?

This bizarre and gloriously uninhibited bloom consists of two parts. The outer portion, known as the spathe, is like a narrow-waisted vase widening towards the brim, where the upper lip curls in upon itself to form a shallow hood. From within this sheath rises a swollen spike, purplish chocolate in colour, known as the spadix. These two parts have a function that is as complex as their structure. Spring insects are attracted

by the smell of rotting flesh produced by the spadix and tumble into the sheer-sided spathe, where they become trapped by a series of downward-pointing hairs. If they are carrying pollen, then they fertilize the female flowers lying at the base of the structure, and when this takes place the male stamens mature, releasing their own pollen on to the insect, while the imprisoning hairs shrivel to allow its eventual escape.<sup>22</sup>

A second question would be: in what ways would this passage gain in effect, quality and interest if no such plant existed and Cocker had invented the whole thing?