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Imagining Wildernesses: Susan Howe's Poetic Corrective

by

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Rooted in Puritan mythology of a New Canaan, the concept of the North American continent as a pure and eternal natural world remains alluring, evocative into our current historical moment, and suggestive of creationist and prelapsarian narratives. Against the overwhelming scientific evidence that proves humankind's irreversible effects on the earth, American literature and fiction continues to mis-represent the natural world as a virginal, ever-replenishing realm that is separate from our own human sphere. The romantic idea of escape or return to a natural environment in order to experience some form of personal growth or rejuvenation stems from this conception. It is this abiding and yet false distinction between human civilization and the wilderness that is the basis for Susan Howe's 1987 *Thorow*, a text in which the author, a poet and visual artist, engages and speaks back to Henry David Thoreau in an effort to reexamine and un-do Thoreau's seamless narrative of man's relationship to the wild. In her linguistically disjunctive and disorienting text, Howe revisits Thoreau's *Walden*, an iconic narrative of the American wilderness, in order to show how Thoreau has closed off and colonized nature in his conception of a static space distinct from the human sphere and subject to human colonization. Beyond her critique of *Walden* itself, Howe's goal is to reopen narratives of "natural" spaces, which she understands to be one half of a false binary that is the product of Puritan ideology and colonization. Departing from conventions of seamless personal narrative and foregrounding the made-ness of language in addition to the made-ness of the idea of the natural world, Howe's *Thorow* is a disorienting mix of indigenous and colonial histories blurred by the continuous abandonment of narrative and grammatical conventions. Throughout the poem, Howe urges the reader to question their preconceived understanding of the natural world. Yet even as Howe shows how our false conception of the natural world is rooted in received narratives and language that is itself a construct – that is, not natural – Howe herself cannot

entirely escape her own learned linguistic structures, eventually falling into a self-made trap that mirrors and would seem to reinforce the same false dichotomy as Thoreau. Nevertheless, as I will argue here, in urging her reader to question the narrative structures on which we typically rely, the poet creates a work that does expose nature as a man-made, rhetorical construct.

Henry David Thoreau's 1854 *Walden* and Susan Howe's 1987 *Thorow* each chronicle one person's self-conscious human occupation of a specific natural setting, and both texts begin with expectations that the natural retreat will provide intellectual and spiritual growth. Whereas Thoreau's text describes his two-year residence at Walden Pond, where he built a hut and attempted to live independently, Howe's long poem chronicles her residence at Lake George in Upstate New York, a site of natural beauty that has been overrun with tourism and industry. In contrast with Thoreau's conventional first-person narrative structure, Howe breaks down the formal separation between narrator and reader; instead of meticulously describing her personal experience as a lone individual, the poet opens her text and invites the reader to experience the journey into the wilderness together with her as a "scout." In several ways, then, Howe's *Thorow* is an attempt to correct not only the traditionally masculinist narrative structure of and illusions of American individualism in *Walden*, but also the deeply ingrained narrative of a distinct and conquerable natural world that Thoreau's work typifies. Howe's text is acutely aware of the violent colonial traumas of the region surrounding Lake George, and the author explores this through a complex and self-conscious process of re-opening historical narratives. Whereas Thoreau's text is meant to teach his reader how and why to interact with the wilderness, Howe's scout and language play bring the reader into her process of making meaning, allowing the reader to inhabit her poem as agent and experiencer. *Thorow*'s fragmentary language invites the reader to participate in a type of co-authorship, and the role of the scout provides a vantage point

on the work's journey through space and time. But whereas the poem concerns itself with the discovery of a pre-colonial, untouched natural world, Howe's scout becomes lost, eventually discovering that this imagined space is a fantasy. It is only through experiencing the scout's journey that the reader may come to understand the lack of fulfillment in *Thorow*.

The romantic concept of a primeval wilderness as an entirely separate place into which we can escape blocks any possibility of understanding where we (as humans and individuals) fit into the earth's ecosystem. In addition to providing an excuse for our exploitation of natural resources, this firmly established ideal of the wilderness as an untouched paradise is founded on a false dichotomy between humans and the natural world. Contemporary ecocritic Kate Soper asks us to question our assumptions even deeper as she considers the idea of nature itself. She reminds us that "nature is only signified in human discourse" and explains "that there is an important sense in which it is correct to speak of 'nature' as itself a cultural product or construction" (124). Recognizing the concept of nature and the natural world as linguistic as well as ideological constructions allows us to question the tools we use to understand our surroundings. Nature and the natural world as distinct from humanity is a man-made dichotomy that has become ingrained in our conception of the world. Soper explains, "'nature' is the concept through which humanity thinks its difference and specificity" (125). According to Soper, by conceptualizing "nature" we have not only blocked ourselves from any real understanding of our environment, but we have also allowed the exploitation of the earth's natural resources.

Soper's revelation that nature is a human construct and product of our discourse is difficult to comprehend. Man as distinct from nature is fundamental to the way that we think about the world and understand our place in it, and this false dichotomy supports a commonly held belief in a pure natural world to which we may return for replenishment. While Susan

Howe's *Thorow* illustrates an awareness of this construction, she is also implicated in the fantasy of an untouched space. The poet describes her expectations of Lake George in a 1989 interview with Tom Beckett:

I thought I could feel it when it was pure, enchanted, *nameless*. There never was such a pure place. In all nature there is violence. Still it must have been wonderful at first sight. Uninterrupted nature is usually a dream enjoyed by the spoilers and looters — my ancestors. It's a first dream of wildness that most of us need in order to breathe; and yet to inhabit wilderness is to destroy it. An eternal contradiction. (21)

Despite her admission that this fantasy is virtually unrealizable, Howe retains the notion of a pure natural world beyond the human, paradoxically reinforcing the fantasy's existence. Her explication of this impossible fantasy makes clear that she subscribes to the dichotomous existence of humans and nature, a conception that we find in her poem as well. By conflating a "nameless" nature with a "pure" nature, Howe subscribes to the idea that the natural world is a distinct, non-human entity, and that this purity can only exist in the absence of humanity. She hints at how entrenched this belief in a virginal and untouched natural world is by describing it as something that we "need in order to breathe." And yet, Howe's *Thorow* is ultimately unable to locate this pure, nonviolent natural world, ending in a narrative "rabbit hole" where all sense of time and place are lost. The text's inability to find an untouched natural space bolsters the poet's assertion that human occupation, by definition, destroys a "pure" natural environment. The deeply rooted and linguistic nature of this ideology is evident in Howe's sources (Thoreau, etc.) as well as in the poem itself as the poet struggles to break from a notion of the natural world rooted in a canonical Edenic fantasy. However, while Howe is unable to fully break from this

false narrative in her interview with Beckett, her “scout” in *Thorow* approaches the realization that the distinction between humans and the natural world is a rhetorical construct.

Conceptualization of humanity as distinct from nature is not a digital-age phenomenon; depictions of a distinct natural space and the desire to retreat into that space and away from the human exist from the earliest American English texts. Participating in this tradition during the mid 19th century, Thoreau describes his project in *Walden* with, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (83).

Immediately Thoreau bestows on “the woods” a higher, almost mystical power. Thoreau is placing a primordial expectation on the landscape of Walden Pond in asking it to validate his life and existence. By subscribing to the belief that there is something in or at Walden Pond that cannot be found in Concord, Thoreau is reinforcing the imagined distinction between the spaces occupied by mankind and every other thing or being on earth. He continues, “I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms” (83). Thoreau’s project in the woods is from the outset framed as a violent conquest. Not only does he conceptualize Walden Pond and its inhabitants as an entity distinct from himself, but it is a space where he maintains complete power and may, as an enlightened man, conquer life itself.

Thoreau spent most of his life in Concord, Massachusetts, a town rich in events and ideologies that saturate the American imagination, such as Transcendentalism. The author was an active member of the Transcendental Club, and understood the environment at Walden Pond as a space where he could align himself with the natural world. Stephen Fender explains

transcendentalism by explaining that “[t]his half-religious, half-philosophical belief in the spiritual unity of the world, accessible by instinct rather than reason, . . . [took] root in the New England Puritan belief in direct access to Christ without the mediation of priest or established church hierarchy” (x). In exploring the links between the Puritans and the Transcendentalists’ configurations of the natural world, it becomes clear that there existed (or perhaps exists) in New England a strong belief that “nature” is a distinct, inherited space in which individuals may access a spiritual truth. Fender describes Thoreau’s project at Walden in the context of a broader American ideology, noting, “it seems to re-enact another powerful constituent of national identity, the myth that man (it is almost always a man) somehow grows to American maturity through an initiation on the isolated frontier” (xxii). Despite (or maybe because of) the fact that Concord and its environs were becoming increasingly connected to the city of Boston and its commercial interests, Thoreau’s ‘errand into the wilderness’ evokes the Puritan settlers’ desire to retreat from material worldliness.

The initial Puritan settlers in New England were fleeing what they saw as a fallen Christianity, and were anxious of being infected by the worldliness of those around them in Holland and England. The Puritans understood New England as a “hidious and desolate wildernes” in which they should struggle as an antidote to the temptations of material pleasures in Europe (Bradford 116). Historian Alan Taylor cites a Puritan’s comparison of New England to Virginia, “If men desire to have a people degenerate speedily, and to corrupt their mindes and bodies too . . . let them se[e]cke a rich soile, that brings in much with little labor; but if they desire that Piety and Godlinesse should prosper . . . let them choose a Country such as [New England] which may yield sufficiency with hard labour and industry” (Taylor 159). Puritan settlers went beyond figuring New England’s landscape as a “New Cannan,” and understood the manual labor

required to survive as necessary to their spiritual salvation (Gatta 21). In his book, *Making nature sacred: literature, religion, and environment in America from the Puritans to the present*, John Gatta explains, “despite the Puritans’ general fear and suspicion of unsettled land, they were also disposed to regard the wild continent as uncorrupted space—and even, on occasion, as a sacred site of regeneration” (25). This understanding of the unsettled (by Europeans) land of New England as a distinct space into which they can escape the commercialization and temptations of Europe creates an unprofaned space where the pilgrims may enhance their spirituality and connection to their god. While the Puritans understood self-improvement and regeneration as a religious project, their need to escape the commercialized ‘human sphere’ reflects Thoreau’s ethical project of leaving Concord in order to “live deliberately” and “learn what it had to teach” (83).

As a member of the Transcendental Club, Thoreau had an ambivalent relationship with the Christian church; however, his work illustrates a desire to locate an eternal truth or meaning, and belief that the natural environment is the appropriate place to do so. Describing Thoreau’s dissatisfaction with the Christian church’s depiction of God, Gatta writes, “If he could not describe such a Being, he nonetheless regarded naturalistic experience as his chief means of pursuing “the true God” (129). While the Puritans understood New England as a space bestowed on them by their God, Thoreau figures this environment as man’s to occupy and learn from. Despite Thoreau’s declared religious ambivalence, his depictions of Walden Pond evoke a spiritual site; its sacred nature depends upon the fact that it is set apart from the increasingly commercialized Concord. Gatta explicates this figuration with, “the first thing to notice, rhetorically, in approaching *Walden* is the regularity with which Thoreau uses the word “sacred”- to evoke not a distinct supernatural order, but a transcendent dimension of this physical world

antithetical to the ‘profane’” (129). Thoreau inherited his Puritan predecessors’ figuration of land uninhabited by humans as uncontaminated, and similarly followed their logic that entering and occupying this space facilitates personal or spiritual rejuvenation.

Thoreau’s concern with the commercialization of Concord’s surroundings reflects the Puritans’ anxiety about the corrupting effect of a materialistic, worldly society. His preoccupation with the railroad, its physical presence in Massachusetts as well as its effect on humanity, is felt throughout *Walden* as he often crosses its path and muses on its purpose and consequences. He interprets the train’s whistle with, “The whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods summer and winter, sounding like the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer’s yard, informing me that many restless city merchants are arriving within the circle of the town, or adventurous country traders from the other side” (106). Not only does Thoreau equate the railroad’s presence to a penetrative invasion of the woods at Walden Pond, but he also understands it as a commercial invasion of daily life in Concord. Later, he reflects on the experience of those riding the train past Walden Pond with,

The cars never pause to look at it; yet I fancy that the engineers and firemen and brakemen, and those passengers who have a season ticket and see it often, are better men for the sight. The engineer does not forget at night, or his nature does not, that he has beheld this vision of serenity and purity once at least during the day. (175)

The reasoning behind Thoreau’s personal mission is evident in his understanding of the engineer’s experience. The woods at Walden Pond, and presumably all unoccupied or undeveloped land, provide a primordial and restorative experience for human visitors. Gatta explores this conception with, “the author envisions the shores of his pond...to be set apart from

the profane world. Walden is ‘a gem of the first water’ (179), a reservoir of original cosmogonical purity said to be bottomless” (130). Thoreau holds the Puritan belief that retreating from the town or city into an uninhabited wilderness leads to spiritual renewal. Despite the fact that explicit Christian rhetoric has been decentered (or removed) in Thoreau’s depiction of his retreat, the idea that there is a depravity in commercialized society remains.

Thoreau’s narrative is possibly the most famous American example of the natural retreat, despite the fact that he lived a mere mile from his parents and friends in Concord. The text’s popularity is not mysterious, as it is filled with comforting and presumably enlightening statements about the natural world and the human condition. Seductively describing Walden Pond, he writes, “A lake is the landscape’s most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth’s eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature” (168). Not only does Thoreau not connect himself to the environment in any meaningful way, but he understands the body of water only in terms of how it reflects himself. Walden Pond is not a place that he becomes a part of in his two years there, but a landscape that he occupies. As Thoreau understands his human sphere as essentially separate from the natural world at the outset, and frames his discourse according to this understanding, he may never experience any real change from living in this more “natural” setting. Gatta discusses the consequences of Thoreau’s ideologies on our contemporary conception of “untouched” natural spaces, arguing that “to make a fetish of protecting roadless territories from human influence will only distract us, say some, from the real environmental challenge, which is learning how to make our home wisely in this physical world” (131). Thoreau’s idyllic conceptualization of Walden Pond and spaces like it inspires the sacralization of uninhabited nature as a form of environmentalism, instead of prompting a critical consciousness of human beings’ place in the earth’s ecosystem. His

experience (or lack thereof) in the text may be extrapolated to that of his readers' who take comfort in his depictions of a distinct natural world separate from the human, which they may enter and penetrate for personal rejuvenation.

The traditional conception of the natural world as distinct from the human is supported and enhanced by the underlying notion of the natural environment as replenishing, and even virginally pure. The idea that the natural world remains a constant backdrop while the human sphere progresses, migrates, and changes strengthens the appeal of escaping back to a natural world, which may represent something lost to modern humans. Reflecting on Walden Pond Thoreau writes, "Successive nations perchance have drunk at, admired, and fathomed it, and passed away, and still its water is green and pellucid as ever" (162). Today, although we scientifically understand that "successive nations" and their pollution do affect the ecosystem and water quality, enduring narratives like Thoreau's as well as modern discourse, such as the "mother earth" concept, render it difficult for societies inscribed with these narratives to truly move away from the conception of a pure and distinct natural world.

The entrenched and widely accepted binary between human and nature mirrors the dualistic distinction between man and woman, and in fact Thoreau's conception of Walden Pond is deeply informed by the notion of nature as feminine. In her essay, "Thoreau's Ambivalence Toward Mother Nature," Louise Westling describes the effect of this "gender dynamic embedded in the rich dialogic texture of *Walden*" as implicit in "the long tradition of debasing the feminine, Nature and matter in order to exalt the mind and the masculine, culture and spirit" (262). Where man is linguistically aligned with culture, production, and progress, woman is aligned with the natural world: a pure virginal landscape or a nurturing mother. It is important to realize the multiple ways our entrenched narratives align the natural world with the feminine, as

well as the many and compounding consequences. Soper unpacks the various ‘nature as woman’ conceptualizations, explaining “nature is allegorized as either a powerful maternal force, the womb of all human production, or as the site of sexual enticement and ultimate seduction” (141). In understanding the non-human natural world as conceptualizations of the human female’s body, we strengthen narratives which support occupation, penetration, and even control over the environment. Soper continues, “it is in the perception of the colonizer, for whom nature is both a nurturant force—a replenished bosom or womb of renewal—and a ‘virgin’ terrain ripe for penetration, that the metaphor of the land as female is most insistent” (142). Soper illustrates how useful the nature as female construction is for those who want to take something from nature. Regardless of their origin or basis in truth, familiar narratives and linguistic norms are powerful forces in shaping how we conceptualize the world around us. Understanding the natural environment as something distinct from humanity, an entity capable of consistent replenishment, allows individuals like Thoreau to occupy and assume dominance over an environment. In creating an other, humanity creates itself. Westling argues that “*Walden* enacts a dramatic dance along a continuum between attraction and repulsion, love and disgust, in the imagined presence of a female Nature from which the author’s masculine identity compels him to distinguish himself” (263). Critically, these dualisms are not separate-but-equal relationships, but oppressive relationships in which the other is meant to serve the oppressor. In using the same logic to justify his colonization of Walden Pond that society uses to oppress women, Thoreau is strengthening both oppressive binaries.

Not only does Thoreau repeatedly refer to Walden Pond as resisting man’s defiling, he describes its “heaving breast” and various penetrative scenes (170). Ultimately, Thoreau approaches Walden Pond as a colonizer. He describes the process of building of his hut and

meticulously reports his expenses and daily activities, reminiscent of a traveler's log. Thoreau's understanding of the pond as his to conquer and occupy is made clear as he describes rowing his boat into the center of the pond. He writes, "I used to raise the echoes by striking with a paddle on the side of my boat, filling the surrounding woods with circling and dilating sound, stirring them up as the keeper of a menagerie his wild beasts, until I elicited a growl from every wooded vale and hill-side" (158). Despite the fact that Thoreau had only recently inhabited Walden Pond, he already views himself as a "keeper." In his presence, the nonhuman inhabitants are no longer wild animals, but colonized natives in a "menagerie." As a human male, Thoreau's physical and mental domination over any natural setting is taken for granted and reinforced by the contemporary gender politics that mediate his relationship with Walden Pond.

Whereas Thoreau famously declared his desire to live at Walden Pond independently and away from towns or cities, in *Walden* he shows a fascination with previous human activity at the pond, particularly the story of its origin and name. After recounting the story of an "old squaw" named Walden who was present when the pond formed during an Indian "pow-wow," he reflects, "If the name was not derived from that of some English locality,—Saffron Walden, for instance,—one might supposed that it was called originally *Walled-in* Pond" (165). While Thoreau's interest in Native American and New England folklore and names may seem innocent, that of a hobbyist, it evinces a desire to understand the pond by affixing a reasonable name to it, and by understanding its history in a linear, narrative fashion. Not only does Thoreau learn and record the pond's mythical origin story, he establishes dominance by refuting the story and suggesting name origins based in European colonialism, reason, and the English language. Colonizers seize and maintain power by establishing a knowledge of the colonized. The colonizer acutely understands the utility of naming, mapping, and presuming to understand a

colonized people or space in order to maintain control. Thoreau's effort to record the pond's mystical origin story, refute it, and then assuredly affix an English name to the space is a colonizing act.

Thoreau is satisfied with Walden Pond as is. He does not wish for a space before Europeans or colonizers, subscribing to the belief that nature is an ever-replenishing font of life. Instead, Thoreau himself acts as colonizer of the pond and its nonhuman inhabitants. The anthropomorphic worldview with which Thoreau approaches the woods is most comically displayed in his depiction of an "ant battle" between red and black ants that he witnesses on his wood pile at Walden Pond. He writes, "It was the only battle which I have ever witnessed, the only battle-field I ever trod while the battle was raging; internecine war; the red republicans on the one hand, and the black imperialists on the other" (206). As Thoreau observes the battle he continues to apply not only human, but Western values and histories onto the ants. Thoreau is incapable, or unwilling, to understand what he is seeing through any lens other than the war trope he is familiar with. Despite the fact that he went to the woods to distance himself from human society, its traditional narratives are foundational to his conception of anything he finds there. In addition to his blithe application of his Western values onto a foreign species, Thoreau removes three of the fighting ants from the battle and brings them into his hut so that he may observe them under a microscope. After releasing the wounded survivor of the three he comments, "Whether he finally survived that combat, and spent the remainder of his days in some Hotel des Invalides, I do not know; but I thought that his industry would not be worth much thereafter" (208). While this act of displacement seems small in comparison to many of Thoreau's other activities, even the building of his hut, it is critical because he clearly identified with and even humanized the ants, yet still removed them from their habitat for study and entertainment.

Thoreau's subtle acts of colonization are found throughout his discourse on and physical treatment of Walden and its inhabitants.

Susan Howe's *Thorow* is an archival and poetic corrective to Thoreau's *Walden*, wherein the poet challenges the notion of a linear historical narrative and brings into relief the artificiality of physical space as it is constructed in language. The text distorts given names, suggests historical alternatives, and thoroughly disorients the reader, who is led to participate in the process of re-constructing a history they thought they knew. *Thorow* attempts to locate and bring us to a space outside of, or before, language and canonical narratives, but becomes lost as the poet loses her ability to make meaning without language. Howe's poem begins with a narrative preface, where she explains that she lived in the near deserted Lake George region during the winter and spring of 1987 as a writer-in-residence. She is unsettled by "The town, or what is left of a town...two-star motels have been arbitrarily scrambled between gas stations and gift shops selling Indian trinkets" (40). She goes on to reflect, "In the seventeenth century European adventurer-traders burst through the forest to discover this particular long clear body of fresh water. They brought our story to it. Pathfinding believers in God and grammar spelled the lake into *place*" (40). Howe is wrestling with the practice of naming, which she understands as colonial. Rachel Tzvia Back explores Howe's commentary on naming in this poem, beginning with its title. Back explains that Christopher Columbus's first act in locating a new island was to name it, "which is an act of possessing" (51). She understands Howe's overt distortion of names and words, as well as the poet's commentary on naming, as "an invitation to call the very act of naming into question" (53). While Howe's work is structured as a journey, the poem is acutely aware of colonial traumas which have been enacted in the Lake George region, and consistently breaks from her progression and reminds the reader of this history.

Howe's narrative preface serves to situate the reader physically, as well as to set the poet's intentions at Lake George. She writes,

I thought I stood on the shores of a history of the world where forms of wildness
brought up by memory become desire and multiply....
Interior assembling of forces underneath earth's eye. Yes, she, the Strange,
excluded from formalism. (40)

In searching for a pre-colonial natural space, Howe is invoking the feminine, the signifier for a group that has also been excluded from traditional narrative discourse. Paul Naylor understands Howe's intersectional approach to colonial revision with, "Howe's poem, then, brings to the fore three of the 'anonymous, slighted- inarticulate' voices silenced during the conquest of North America: the voices of nature, of Native Americans, and of women" (52). However, the poem does more than bring these groups "to the fore." Howe's conflation of these oppressed groups serves to rationalize their oppression, by linguistically and conceptually aligning the false binaries that render each of these groups an "other." The poem positions the human female as aligned with and representative of the colonized land and people of America. In attempting to locate a pre-colonial space and existence for these oppressed groups, Howe overtly invokes the nature as female dualism as a tool for representing the natural world. This representation serves to highlight the dualism between (hu)man and nature which is ingrained in our narratives and linguistic norms. Val Plumwood, an Australian environmental philosopher and ecofeminist, defines the term "dualism" in this context as "an alienated form of differentiation, in which power construes and constructs difference in terms of an inferior and alien realm... power is normally institutionalised and 'naturalised' by latching on to existing forms of difference" (42). Plumwood goes on to expose the interrelated nature of these oppressive dualisms in western

culture, arguing that they all stem from the culture/nature dualism. Plumwood argues that these dualisms work together to oppress through a process of “backgrounding.” She describes the process and effect of backgrounding the natural world as

the denial of dependence on biospheric processes, and a view of humans as apart, outside of nature, which is treated as a limitless provider without needs of its own... This denial of dependency is a major factor in the perpetuation of the non-sustainable modes of using nature which loom as such a threat to the future of western society. (21)

By conceptually (but not literally) removing ourselves from nature, we develop and maintain the concept of an ever-replenishing natural world that can and will support our activities and uses. However, in consciously conflating the distinction and subsequent oppression of the natural world with that of women and colonized peoples, Howe is exposing and participating in the “backgrounding” of these populations as well. While Thoreau understood the natural world as a feminized space, distinct from the masculine human space, Howe complicates this dichotomy further by feminizing all oppressed spaces and peoples. Howe’s problematic layering is a confirmation of the nature/culture dualism, through which we maintain a false binary between the created natural world and the human, and allow this conception to construct the way we understand our world. The female/male and colonized/colonizer dichotomies exemplify some of the many interrelated conceptual dualisms which permeate western culture, all of which take direction from the nature/culture dualism.

Howe’s reliance on the feminine as the side of the oppressed is an example of the linguistic structures used to sustain the male/female dualism, creating and maintaining a gendered society in which women’s traditional roles and work are not included in the narrative

of progress. Plumwood explains, “Traditionally, women are ‘the environment’ - they provide the environment and conditions against which male ‘achievement’ takes place, but what they do is not itself accounted as achievement” (22). The discounting of women’s labor is not a new issue in feminist discourse, however understanding this practice as part of a larger system of oppressive dualisms reveals the systemic and linguistic construction of this oppression and reminds us to question and reject the alignment of women with nature. This rejection should not come from a desire to align with the other side of the dualism (culture), but from the knowledge that these dualisms are an oppressive power structure based on created categories. Soper explains the effect of these interrelated dualisms with, “it invites us to suppose that ‘production’ proceeds without reliance on nature, when in fact any form of human creativity involves a utilization and transformation of natural resources” (140). Howe’s compounding of these oppressive ideologies builds a worldview with clear roots in the colonizing narratives she is attempting to correct, where not only the natural world, but all oppressed groups and spaces exist as a backdrop to male cultural production.

Howe’s preface moves from personal narrative to archival, quoting philosophers as well as Thoreau and his contemporaries. She quotes Deleuze and Guattari, arguing, “The proper name is the instantaneous apprehension of a multiplicity” (41). Howe is beginning to conceptualize, or create, the Lake George of the past, though which past is unclear, as a primordial and indeterminate space that has been appropriated by colonial conquest, mapping, and naming. Prior to the arrival of European colonizers, Howe believes in a space not arrested by language and proper names, but a space allowed to exist as its many and multiplying forms. She seeks to locate or experience this space. She writes, “In March 1987, looking for what is looking, I went down to unknown regions of indifferentiation. The Adirondacks *occupied* me” (40). While the poem’s

preface opens as a wholly personal account of arriving at Lake George, she quickly abandons this authority and adopts a submissive, mediary-like relationship with the environment. William Montgomery describes the effect of Howe's authorial displacement with, "This opens the idea of possession to two interpretations: territorial occupation of natural landscape, and the possession of the internal landscapes by unconscious forces that appear external to subjective agency. It is with this doubled impulse that Howe's poem gains its communicative resonance" (107-8). The poet is urging herself and her reader to break from the cognitive ordering, containing, and possessing of the environment with closed historical narratives. Unlike her source, who "deliberately" describes why he went to the woods and what he was looking for, Howe's goal is not a singular personal narrative with Lake George as a backdrop but rather an attempt to open up and simultaneously represent the buried histories of this space.

Howe's archival opening, which incorporates but also confuses the concept of a defined author and speaker, highlights the poet's discomfort with traditional authorship. The final source material in Howe's preface is an excerpt from a text quoting a local farmer's impression of Thoreau:

'Henry D. Thoreau—Henry D. Thoreau,' jerking out the words with withering contempt. 'His name ain't no Henry D. Thoreau than my name is Henry D.

Thoreau. And everybody knows it, and he knows it. His name's Da-a-vid Henry and it ain't been nothing but Da-a-vid Henry. And he knows that!' (42)

This humorous quotation not only exposes the illusory nature of proper names, but also begins to open up the singular authority of Thoreau's authorship. *Walden* is presented as a wholly personal narrative, where we are not meant to question who is speaking. Howe disrupts the concept of an individual experience and narrative by revealing the subjective nature of the medium, and then

progressing with her own work in a manner that rejects a singular narrative and the concept of a consistent speaker. Throughout the poem it is almost impossible to discern who is speaking, as well as who or what the poem is tracking. She introduces her scout at the opening of the poem, however the scout's positionality is never defined and crosses racial as well as temporal lines. Later in the poem Howe reminds us of her scout with, "Author the real author/ acting the part of a scout" (51). Howe's scout, her reader, and the poet herself are all present in the poem's moving forward and backward through history and meaning-making, a disorienting move which serves to question the established positions of author and reader. The reader begins to understand the poet, the scout, and the poem itself as interrelated entities experiencing the movement through history that Howe initiates. By unsettling the authority of "the author," Howe creates a poem that goes beyond what the poet is capable of expressing and works with the reader to make meaning. The poet's dismantling of a singular and linear historical narrative is an attempt to reopen what she understands to be falsely closed historical narratives in search of a truth not determined by one recorder or speaker of history. Despite her attempt to open up the narrative of the natural environment, as well as language and constructed authority, Howe's conceptualization of a distinct and separate natural world, as well as her mode of recording, essentially links her project to Thoreau's. In their attempt to break from an imagined human sphere, each writer relies not only on language, but narrative and colonial history to inscribe their story.

Howe links Henry David Thoreau to the colonial processes of appropriation and (re)naming in her preface, quoting a letter of his in which he attempts to explicate the various native names for bodies of water. Shortly after, the poem continues, "Every name driven will be as another rivet in the machine of a universe flux" (41). Howe understands the process of naming and adhering to given names as the process of halting a thing in "flux," a process of co-opting

natural progression with something man made. This clearly articulated view may be seen as the reason for the poet's word play throughout the poem, which begins with misspelled words and builds to the complete abandonment of narrative and spatial conventions. The title of Howe's work, "Thorow," is a clear nod to Thoreau, but should not be read as simply a misspelling of her source's name. Howe quotes Sir Humfrey Gilbert in her preface, "'To proove that the Indians aforenamed came not by the Northeast, and that there is no thorow passage navigable that way'" (41). Not only is the poet broadening her exposure of name and ownership-obsessed white men, she is introducing an alternative meaning for her title. A single name or narrative cannot represent the multiplicity of the existence and history of places like Lake George and Walden Pond. Howe's multi-meaning title hints at the complex and possibly infinite nature of a space's meaning. Back explains that the poem's title, "may also be read as the archaic spelling of 'through,' advancing the notion of this text as a movement toward, and opening up, a passage through" (51). In addition to complicating her inspiration's proper name, Howe's title evinces her text's function as a journey into and back through the complicated history of her ancestors. Discussing Howe's use of archival and canonical work in her own, Ming-Qian Ma suggests that the poet positions the "source text" as "the established conceptual representation and investigates it as the crime scene" (749). Instead of interpreting Howe's source texts and epithets as simple contextual aids, we should read them as entry points in her disruptive efforts. In order to locate, move through, and open up this history, she must interrogate the linguistic power structures that have been used to create and reinforce colonial power.

Howe's discomfort with given names, or given colonial names, is rooted in a sense of complicity in colonial violence. She writes, "The German Flatts/Their women old men & children/Numerous than I imagined/Singing their War song/I am/Part of their encroachment"

(47). The poet is likely referencing the September 1778 raid on the German Flatts settlement by British loyalists and Iroquois, led by Mohawk military leader Joseph Brant, or Thayendanegea (Barr 151-2). The scout's position in this conflict is unclear, serving to initially focus the historical reference on human violence, and not historical distinctions and victories. However, the poet is clear in stating the colonial name for this space, which draws attention not only to colonial settlement and naming, but reminds us of the eventual victor. The poem returns to the violence of European appropriation later with,

The origin of property
that leads here depth

Indian names lead here

Bars of a social system
Starting for Lost Pond

psychology of the lost
First precarious Eden

a scandal of materialism

My ancestors tore off
the first leaves

picked out the best stars
Cries accompany laughter. (52)

Howe reminds her reader of the importance that place names hold in mapping and locating, but also for ownership and legal purposes. The above section begins by introducing the concept of land ownership, then complicating this static concept with the idea that names used by the conquered still provide an entry point for this space. The scout's journey to Lost Pond is not possible without the violent "social system" that maintains this affixed name, as the name literally creates the space. Howe importantly returns to the concept of a "lost" and "first" natural

space as she realizes that her conception of a space cannot be divorced from its name. Naylor exposes the poetic subversiveness of Howe's work by explaining that,

Naming is an essential step in the capitalist process of appropriating and mastering nature in order to convert it into private property. And regulating nature's representation in language with the tools of grammar and spelling keeps the lines of ownership and mastery well defined. (55-6)

Critically, Howe pairs her inclusion of proper names with allusions to violence and conquest, reinforcing her desire to open up closed historical narratives. In consistently returning to painful and lost histories, Howe is exposing the "depth" and multiplicity of this space.

Following her narrative preface, Howe's poem begins "Go on the Scout they say/They will go near Swegachey/I have snow shoes and Indian shoes" (43). Attempting to straddle the colonial occupation in which she is implicated by birth and the pre-colonial landscape she seeks to access, Howe creates this scout as our speaker and guide. Back interprets the uncertain positionality of the scout with, "[t]he scout of *Thorow* is not settler or settler's outcast, not Indian or Indian's victim; this scout...seems intent upon travelling between the two sides" (53). Despite the scout and Howe's clear goal of locating a pre-colonial Lake George, violent traces of this history are consistent throughout the poem. The initial stanzas of the poem are a journey, cut with lines such as, "There are traces of blood in a fairy tale" (44) and "Distant monarchs of Europe/European grid on the forest" (45). Howe's scout and poem, while searching for a space before or free from normative narrative, remain conscious of the colonial "grid" and canonical fictions used to represent histories. In attempting to trace what she has already described as indeterminate, Howe is unable to utilize language and narrative to describe a space she sees as distinct from her human world. Howe attempts to break from language in order to achieve her

transcendence, writing, “slipping back to the primordial/We go through the word Forest” (49). As the poem progresses, the scout’s journey and all semblance of narrative is lost.

Howe’s anxiety with the concepts of naming and mapping are based in a belief that these practices are limiting and restrictive. Her similar discomfort with the concept of authorship is made clear as she forces her reader to decode and interpret the poem, allowing a co-authorship that embraces multiple worldviews and histories. Naylor explores Howe’s construction of a co-authorship with her reader on two levels: the grammatical and the creation of a space in the poem. *Thorow* steadily rejects punctuation and standard syntax as it moves forward, without which the reader is left to draw on their own assumptions and knowledge to make meaning from the work. Naylor explains,

It is a poetry of phrases and fragments best read as elements of a collage in which the reader supplies the connections—connections rendered even more indeterminate by the absence of punctuation. The elision of almost all hypotactic markers in this passage, furthermore, makes it virtually impossible for the reader to “master” it by applying the grid of traditional grammar. (55)

In forcing the reader to confront and make meaning from a text without the conventions they are used to, Howe asks us to question the linguistic power structures we rely on. Howe titles the second portion of her prose introduction “Narrative in Non-Narrative,” and it is here that the poet begins to ignore normative syntax. She writes, “In paternal colonial systems a positivist efficiency appropriates primal indeterminacy,” arguing that colonial or governing institutions enforce narrative structures which reduce and close real multiplicities (40). Howe’s linguistic play and challenges not only force the reader to take an active role in making meaning, but also invite the reader to question their reliance on traditional narrative structures. The co-authorship

that the poet requires of her readers not only provides meta-commentary on the indeterminate nature of historical narratives and authorship, but also gives the poem's readers an opportunity to explore their own reliance on normative linguistic structure. Peter Quartermain describes the poem's relationship to and use of language "as an emblematic collection of signs, potential meanings, abbreviations, wonders, and terrors to which she is subject rather than 'master'" (182-3). By slowly removing the grammatical and narrative conventions that we rely on, Howe encourages her reader to see past the natural world that we have created and attempt to locate a space without language.

Howe's preface situates the poem at Lake George, New York, in the winter and spring of 1987, yet this sense of time and place begins to unravel as the scout begins her journey. As Part I of the poem begins we are immediately conscious of a moving back, away from the present: "domain of transcendental subjectivity/Etymology the this//present in the past now/So many thread" (43). After introducing the idea of an indeterminate past, the poem loses its sense of place at contemporary Lake George as various historical events, European conquests, Indigenous peoples, and biblical narratives are referenced, often as stops or traumatic memories on the scout's journey. Naylor describes the effect:

[T]he reader mediates the opposed images to such a great extent that authorship becomes a collaborative event taking place between writer and reader rather than a hierarchical event in which the writer directs the reader to the "correct" interpretation...without the reader's participation, the texts seem to be a jumble of phrases and paragraphs lacking in coherence and purpose. (56-7)

Not only must Howe's reader supply connections in order to create linguistic and grammatical meaning in the work, they also find themselves questioning and searching for a sense of physical

location in the poem. Throughout his chapter Naylor presents Howe's disruption of "place" in the poem as a poetic device, arguing that her work situates the reader in an unknown space between the "real world" and the theoretical space of "pure poetry" (43-4). By using historical events and biblical narratives to disrupt our sense of time, place, and even self, the poet is challenging the ways that we use historical events to define and understand the environment and our place in it. Howe's goal in the poem is to reach a primordial, or at least pre-colonial or pre-language space at Lake George; by removing conventional grammar and syntax, as well as layering various histories and narratives onto the space, she asks her reader to consider an indeterminate space, not tied to one history, narrative, or system of meaning.

The aversion to concrete place names and histories in *Therow* results in a reading experience where we cannot locate when or where we are in the poem. Once the scout's journey begins, our sense of time and place (Lake George, 1987) slips quickly away. The scout's journey is introduced as having "So many thread" (43) and begins with the visual of a dark and vast space: "Fence blown down in winter storm//darkened by outstripped possession/Field stretching out of the world" (44). The destruction of a means of enforcing private property and opening a field that extends "out of the world" by a force of nature (winter storm) illustrates the poet's hope for her poem. The poem is an attempt to explore a relationship to one's natural environment outside the confines of canonical histories and narratives, therefore destroying a symbol of property ownership is the poet's way of giving her scout that opportunity. However, symbols and reminders of Native and European histories appear consistently throughout the poem. Howe is acutely aware of the implication of linguistic structures in accepted historical narratives, and her work to remove these structures from the poem is an attempt to locate a Lake George and natural world that is not limited and solely understood by traditional, colonial narratives. It becomes

clear that, within the confines of language and the poetic form, escaping these histories is not possible.

The poet and the poem itself display an awareness of their implication and complicity in powerful colonial histories, stories that have come to define the American narrative. In order to locate a natural world not corrupted by her ancestors' violence, the poet attempts to strip her conception of the wilderness of any connection to these narratives by distorting and eventually abandoning them. She writes, "Maps give us some idea/Apprehension as representation" (54). This consistent idea that naming and mapping is a falsely arresting action and denies a space its multiplicity is important as it reminds us that any form of representation will ultimately fail. Despite this, Howe is using poetry to expose and open up power structures that constitute and uphold language. Quartermain states that Howe's work, "rejects outright the notion of world as text, world as language, world as trope," a rejection that is evident in the poet's poetic and meta-textual challenges of standardized narratives (192-3). Earlier in the work, as she illustrates narratives of European and Indian violence, she twice repeats the lines: "*Revealing traces, Regulating traces*" (46). This italicized indication enforces the poem's lesson that accepted histories are not complete, uncontested truths, but rather carefully maintained selections, or traces, of historical events. It is the closed and linear nature of language that allows representation to operate in this selective way, and Howe is conscious of her own regulation even as she attempts to reveal hidden histories.

As Howe locates the violent nature of closed historical narratives in the linguistic structures that represent them, she seeks to represent her and her scout's experience without adhering to these norms and expectations. Quartermain describes Howe's conception of a closed historical narrative, explaining that those left out "have been hidden by a utilitarian, canonizing,

and classicizing impulse...which, patriarchal, seeks to possess the text by removing or rationalizing all ‘accidentals,’ confining it to a single body of meaning” (192). Howe’s work in *Therow* is to challenge this “single body of meaning” by bringing “accidentals” and indeterminate histories back into a discourse and not close the narrative she presents. The product is a work that cannot rely on language but instead begins to illustrate what language does not provide. The work of writing about the limits of linguistic structure is difficult, and Howe describes this with,

Force made desire wander
 Jumping from one subject

to another
 Besieged and besieged

in a chain of Cause
 The eternal First Cause

I stretch out my arms
 to the author. (51)

Howe reminds us of our almost instinctive tendency to reduce narratives and ideologies by categorizing and creating “subjects,” and illustrates the struggle she undertakes to construct a work free from the linear, cause-effect narrative that language requires. Importantly, this metatextual moment does not indicate success or even satisfaction, but depicts a “besieged” poet who recognizes the foundational nature of language’s closed structure. As the poem progresses and moves from archival patchwork to poetic stanzas and finally to words and phrases scattered and turned upside down, the uninked spaces become critical. In searching for a space before accepted dichotomies, narratives, and power structures, Howe moves beyond distorting language to abandoning it in her representation.

The final pages of *Thorow* depict various words, some accepted and some constructed, scattered across the page, providing no linear sequence, standard sentences, or grammatical markers. The lines prior to this final poetic wreckage illustrate the poem's disorientation in trying to move away from normative meaning-making:

Elegiac western Imagination

Mysterious confined enigma
a possible field of work

The expanse of unconcealment
so different from all maps

Spiritual typography of elegy

Nature in us as a Nature
the actual one the ideal self

tent tree sere leaf spectre
Unconscious demarcations range

I pick my compass to pieces

Dark here in the driftings
in the spaces drifting

Complicity battling redemption. (55)

Howe's inability to navigate the space that she is attempting to uncover is clear as she recalls the elegiac mode of representing, a form she is rejecting but that is also ingrained in the way that she understands and creates histories. The poet realizes how unprepared she is to make meaning without the tools and standards that she has been taught to understand history with, and comments on the immense and possibly immeasurable reality of a natural space not contained by linguistic norms. Howe's final line here illustrates the struggle to—but also the reason for—locating this unfathomable space: the poet will remain complicit in violent narratives and the real histories they represent unless she forfeits normative linguistic structures, risking the failure of

her work. Therefore, the poem must enter a poetical space essentially devoid of meaning in order to illustrate the complete hold that language has over our process of meaning-making. However, in doing so Howe is rejecting the formative dichotomous nature of language. Ma explains that Howe's work "aims at deconstructing language as the Cartesian construct of the real" (469). In addition to urging us to notice and reject our reliance on grammatical and syntactical norms, *Thorow* exposes the foundational ways in which the structure of language governs the dichotomous manner in which we understand our world. Furthermore, by reminding her reader of the variety of meanings for the term "nature," the poet invokes the notions of individuality and self-discovery. However, she immediately rejects the concept of an "ideal self" as she does the ideal narrative. In revealing the multiplicity of nature, the poem also hints at the indeterminate *nature* of personal narrative and experience. While the poem is able to use language and poetic form to describe the falseness of our conception of a pure, primordial natural space, Howe's search for this space and attempt to represent it implicate her in the very narrative she is trying to open up. Montgomery links Howe to her source, explaining that "Her problematic pursuit of origins is a reawakening of Thoreau's version of American wilderness, but one that is suffused with pessimism and ambivalence" (103). The poem's final stanzas, in recognizable poetic form, illustrate the poet and her scout's ultimate disorientation as they move back through history attempting to reject any use of conclusive historical narratives. Without maps, linear narratives, or a "compass" to guide them, they become lost in the "word forest."

Like Thoreau, Howe is in search of some change in her conception of herself as she occupies the wilderness. In introducing the scout and her journey the poem reads, "Idea of my present/not my silence" (43). Therefore, the poet is aware of the work she must do in order to confront and correct her learned conceptualization of history as a closed narrative. The truth or

renewed understanding that she seeks is not a new or revised narrative, it is the articulation of indeterminacy that she knows history has expunged. Howe scholar Lisa Joyce explains that “the turn to the primeval does not reveal a clarity of identity, but is instead a pathway to the recognition of the multivalence of place and of person.” The difficulty that Howe and her reader encounter in *Thorow* is not necessarily accepting this “multivalence,” but using language to express and understand it. Section “2” of *Thorow* begins,

Walked on Mount Vision

New life after the Fall
So many true things

which are not truth itself
We are too finite

Barefooted and bareheaded
extended in space. (49)

After introducing the paradoxical multiplicity of truth with a biblical allusion, Howe follows this passage with a mention of Noah, illustrating her struggle to make meaning without the narratives she has been taught to map her experiences onto. These stanzas, importantly at the beginning of the poem’s final section, describe the poet’s awareness of the need to abandon reliance on spatial and narrative conventions in order to move towards a representation that does not erase unclear and conflicting histories in favor of a definitive “truth.” To accurately represent a space or experience prior to the normative construction of a “pure” natural world, Howe and her reader must recognize their own complicity in “finite” meaning-making.

The image and physical sense of a frozen and snow-covered space is present from the poem’s outset and is continually described throughout the journey. The final lines of part “I” of *Thorow* read,

The snow

is still hear

Wood and feld
all covered with ise

seem world anew
Only step

as surveyor of the Wood
only Step. (48)

It is critical to note that in the published text the spacing between individual lines here is not conventional, as though even in the pairings of ideas and the briefest of thoughts there is an opening or a breaking apart. The lines quoted above evoke multi-sensory interaction with the frozen natural space, making palpable to the reader Howe's attempt to immerse herself in this unwelcoming place. Moreover, the poet's subtle play with language lays bare the relationship of meaning to context, showing how meanings are produced by readers and listeners (and, extrapolating into physical space, observers and followers) who have been conditioned to anticipate what comes next in a recognizable pattern or narrative. In mis-spelling 'ice' such that eyes and I also appear, and in layering sound and the act of listening upon place with insertion of the homophone for "here," Howe creates constellations of meaning in multiple registers, rending the fabric of an ostensibly objective description, inserting the witness into what is witnessed, bringing the intimacy of aural experience into a written history. Howe's deliberate misspellings occupy the reader as much as the landscape occupies Howe herself, as an irritant, a felt thing, an adjustment; in Peter Quartermain's reading, "Howe's poem is packed with transformations indeed, and the transformations are wrought by the apparent disorder of the language, the very irrationality of the text, out of which possible figurations and configurations of meaning emerge" (187). It is the combination of seeing, hearing, and reading this work that most completely and finally brings the reader into a co-authorship, even as the breaking of these barriers suggests the

fragility of narrative accounts of history, the futility of any attempt to master or contain the wildness of nature, and the mutability of language that, like nature, exceeds and overruns. Here and throughout the poem, Howe reminds us to “only Step,” so that we avoid assigning or mapping predetermined narratives onto our experience.

And yet, notwithstanding the poem’s many dismantlings of received language and interruptions in received meanings and the poet’s concentrated efforts to locate a place and an experience unmediated by colonial histories and narratives, Howe relies upon the very norms she is attempting to escape. She writes, “Expectation of Epiphany/Not to look off from it/but to look at it” (50), and later, “I have imagined a center/Wilder than this region/The figment of a book” (54). Her expectations and subsequent policing of those expectations have clear roots in Thoreau’s colonizing project, where he positioned Walden Pond as a sacred but replenishing space from which he could take and move forward from in his own journey of self-discovery and improvement. While Howe’s poem and reader may create and experience a natural space unmarred by closed and violent colonial narratives, the continual referencing of her original fantasy of a “pure, enchanted, *nameless*” nature illustrates the poet’s failure to cognitively escape the linguistic structures that allow her to represent the environment (Beckett 21). Naylor observes, “Howe’s failed attempt to experience that landscape prior to the ‘violence and greed’ that is its history; in other words, the hope of a ‘pure’ encounter with a natural landscape, disengaged from the political realities of that landscape, is as impossible as the hope of creating an autonomous world of words, detached from the concerns of the real world, in poetry” (54). Naylor locates the impossibility and eventual failure of Howe’s project not only in the inescapable historical realities of a space, but also in the normative and linear linguistic structures with which she is attempting to express a primordial space.

The poet's eventual confusion and frustration with her medium is depicted as the final four pages of *Thorow* abandon normative spacing, spelling, and syntax as real and created words and phrases are scattered, turned upside down, and forced to intersect each other. The first two of these four pages appear as near mirror images of each other, each with the phrase "a very deep Rabbit" at the center (56-7). These pages, as much visual art as they are poetry, illustrate the poet's inability to escape language as representor, but also the violence and eventual chaos that Howe finds in attempting to disrupt our normative expectations. Montgomery argues, "The poetic form of *Thorow* is a kind of acknowledgement that linguistic estrangement is always a negotiation with particles of syntax and meaning, not a liberation" (111). Howe's arduous efforts in resisting and disrupting the narratives and structures she has been taught is evident, and her reader must move through the same personal resistance in order to make meaning with the poet. Strangely laid out and disorienting to the uninitiated reader, these facing pages scattered with allusions to colonization, conquest, and the American wilderness become legible when the reader jumps between the two pages, across the book's seam. Importantly, none of the words and phrases related to the environment describes winter, a consistent, harsh, and arresting theme throughout the poem until this point. Instead, the poem reads "Places to walk out to/Cove/waterbug/mud/shrub/wavelet/cusk" (57). These words do not form a typical narrative, but they do call to mind water, new life, and growth, making this a departure from the beginning and bulk of the poem, where the scout moves through an iced-over and snowy Lake George region and where at one point the reader encounters "Winter of the great Snow, Life surrounded by snow" (52). It is only in abandoning linguistic structure completely that the poem moves through and past the frozen. Howe's work closes as a visual and linguistic thaw, which Back interprets as "language's liberation" (56). While it is easy to become frustrated by these pages and rush

through, the active process of co-authorship reveals the poem's thesis, that our conception of the natural world, upon which we depend in order to understand ourselves, cannot exist outside of language.

The poem's final pages force the reader to abandon any lingering expectations of a neat closure to the narrative, and *Thorow* ends without the reemergence of Howe, or even Lake George. These pages traverse history and systems of meaning, evincing the poet's failure to discover her imagined fantasy of a prelapsarian, or pre-language space, but also leaving open the multiplicity of these narratives for her reader. Montgomery describes Howe's successful disorientation with, "*Thorow* is suffused with Thoreauvian perspectives on wilderness and language, but it explores them from the inside; it diagnoses a way of speaking that knowingly remains a prisoner of a certain rhetoric but subjects it to such deformations that its ideological underpinnings begin to come apart" (110). The very (as in selfsame) work that the poet has undertaken to open and disrupt the colonial narratives that define Lake George leaves her lost in "a very deep Rabbit" (56), and she finds herself diligently *representing* the multiple narratives that she finds instead of *experiencing* a space prior to these narratives. The final pages of *Thorow* highlight the entire work's consistent need to provide equal representation to the groups and histories of the Lake George region, therefore underscoring the regulatory and restrictive power of nominations and histories. And yet even as the poet is lost, "Complicity battling redemption" (55), the visual and cognitive experience of the reader allows a reckoning with expected linguistic structures, such that established histories and narratives are fundamentally invalidated. By forcing the reader to attempt meaning making in the absence of normative structure, the poem exposes the restrictive and incomplete nature of language as a representational tool.

Thorow is an effort to correct the colonizing narrative of Thoreau's *Walden*, which is rooted in Puritan conceptualization of the wilderness and continues to permeate contemporary American narratives. However, as we have seen, Howe's project remains mired in this same fantasy of an untouched natural space. For although she seeks to expose and reopen colonial traumas, the poet's desire to locate a pure wilderness is exposed as an inherited fantasy. Describing in *Walden* the beauty of this separate and foreign natural space, Thoreau writes, "She flourishes most alone, far away from the towns" (180). While Howe's inability to escape Thoreau's rhetorical fantasy leaves her unfulfilled, nevertheless her project allows her reader and co-author to confront their reliance on this controlling dichotomy. For in breaking down the boundaries between poet and reader, *Thorow* creates a space where we, along with Howe, must wrestle with the canonical narratives and linguistic structures that we use to make meaning.

Howe begins the final movement of *Thorow* with, "You are of me and I of you, I cannot tell/Where you leave off and I begin" (58). This effective statement of co-authorship and mutual dependency with the "you" of the text can be applied also to the multiplicity of peoples and experiences at Lake George that are referenced throughout the poem. While the poet herself fails to reach and enjoy the "pure" wilderness she seeks, the poem itself, along with its reader and scout, together make possible a way of seeing the idea of nature as a man-made thing. Howe's *Thorow* is firmly, and perhaps fatally, rooted in a dichotomous conception of the natural and human worlds, an ideology which serves as the basis for oppressive, "othering" dichotomies. And yet, her poem effectively exposes and opens closed historical narratives that govern not only the way we create history, but the formative structure of our language.

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