



figure 1 "Scorned as Timber, Beloved of the Sky"
Emily Carr (1939)

'HONEST PAINTING:' A FRAMEWORK FOR OVERCOMING ANTHROPOCENTRISM

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Fatima Zahra is a 3rd year student completing a double Major in Environmental Studies and Human Geography with a Focus in Planning and Minor in Forest Conservation. This paper highlights the value of intersectional perspectives and creative solutions in environmentalism. Using Emily Carr's 'honest painting' technique as a model, it considers the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Archibald Lampman to argue a new framework for approaching anthropocentrism, through a reconfiguration of the human-nature relationship.

Anthropocentrism has become the prevailing narrative of our human-nature relationship and is often seen as a concrete element of the modern social imaginary. However, there are creative ways for this perception to be changed. By viewing the human-nature relationship as painted artwork, this commentary will argue the need to approach it through the framework of Emily Carr's 'honest painting.' To support this claim, the work of Archibald Lampman and Gerard Manley Hopkins will be analyzed, first demonstrating the modern conception of the city as alienated from nature, followed by an understanding of how to re-incorporate it back into the painting of our social imaginary, in order to overcome anthropocentrism.

In order to use honest painting as a framework for this argument, it must first be defined. Carr describes the right way to paint as painting honestly, which is "trying for the bigger thing". This entails including all aspects of the landscape, including the seemingly negative ones. Carr compares this to the reaction people have to puppies, finding joy in their innocent appearance and seeing a nuisance in other aspects of caring for them. Similarly, she urges against leaving out the negative parts of the environment just to impose a specific positive meaning, and brings this concept into practice in her work, with paintings like *Scorned as Timber, Beloved of the Sky* (Figure 1), which

depicts stumps and degraded landscapes. What this produces is a painting that is more reflective of the reality of creation and allows her to “listen to the voice of God in and through that very thing.” By allowing Carr to see God “through” the landscape, this framework is the very essence of non-anthropocentrism, viewing the value of nature not in human-centered terms, but in its relation to itself or to God.

Now, if anthropocentrism is to be overcome through this framework, we need to recognize the tree stumps that are missing from the picture and re-introduce them. One example that will be focused on is the city, which is the setting for the ‘buffered self,’ a civilizational disconnect where the boundaries between the self and the outside world are very evident. For Lampman, the city is a place of greed, agitation and negativity, which is expressed in *Life and Nature*. In the poem, Lampman walks through both the city and the meadow, describing that life in the city “seemed sad” whereas in the meadow, “the very word seemed sweet.” This is one of many examples of Lampman rejecting the capitalistic value system in the city and calling for a return to nature. However, there is an important distinction to make here, because if misunderstood, this perception of nature as a place of solace from the evil of the city is a dangerous narrative for the buffered self.

This is where Carr’s ‘honest painting’ must be called to mind. By suggesting that the city is not part of the painting and that in order to reconnect with nature, one must leave the city, this narrative can contribute to anthropocentric ideas, by further dividing the settings for humans and nature. This is the social imaginary that anthropocentrism perpetuates and is not what Lampman is advocating for. In *On the Companionship with Nature*, he writes “so shall we grow like her in mould and bent,” and “let us be with her wholly at all hours” This demonstrates his understanding that humans have their source in nature, and that his critique of the city does not suggest an abandonment of it, but a reconfiguration to incorporate nature. Therefore, it is necessary to re-introduce the city into the social imaginary, not in a capacity disconnected and buffered from nature, but molded into the fabric of the natural world.

Practical questions then arise of how to reincorporate it, which can be answered through the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins, his “particular periods of admiration” of the mundane, and how he encourages a dialogue with nature. Examples of this are abundant in his writing, like his praise of the bluebell as the most beautiful thing he has seen, as well as the ash, barley and specific growth patterns in leaves and tree boughs.

Using these examples, Hopkins explains two characteristics that have the potential to shift the anthropocentric modern social imaginary, if internalized. The first is inscape, which is the individual complexity and essential quality of things, and the second is the running instress, the force that distinguishes them and unfolds the inscape. By positioning these external forces as providing meaning and differentiation between things, Hopkins defies anthropocentric ideas of human perception as the source of meaning. To recognize these forces, in the bluebell, the barley and the mundane of daily life, is to recognize the inherent value of nature, and its existence outside the needs of humans. Bringing back honest painting, it can be argued that Hopkins would include the stumps and 'ugly' parts of the landscape because they demonstrate the voice of nature, which he urges humans to engage in a dialogue with. This recognition of the value of seemingly useless things, is difficult for the modern to grasp, as it negates the idea of value resting in service to humans.

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Therefore, to overcome anthropocentrism, the modern imaginary must work to recognize the inscape and instress in the mundane elements of nature within the city, allowing nature to speak for itself, despite the potential lack of direct value to humans.

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It is evident that through the framework of Emily Carr's 'honest painting,' that there is potential for overcoming the anthropocentric construction of nature. The first step is to understand what is missing from the picture, through the distinction between city and nature, recognizing the harms that Lampman warns against. The city can then be re-introduced by following Hopkins' practice of appreciating the beauty of the mundane, through inscape and instress. While this combination of theories does not ensure a complete overturn of anthropocentrism, it certainly contributes to a broader dialogue of allowing nature to speak for itself, encouraging a reconfiguration of the modern social imaginary to overcome anthropocentrism.