

What is Nature?

Culture, Politics and the non-Human

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- 70 Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1992).
- 71 For a challenging discussion of its persistence within geographical study itself, see Doreen Massey, 'Politics and Space/Time', *New Left Review* 196 (November–December, 1992).
- 72 See T. O. Johnson and D. Cairns (eds), *Gender in Irish Writing* (Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1991), and esp. the article by D. Cairns and S. Richards, in this edited collection, pp. 121–38.
- 73 Ross Poole, *Morality and Modernity* (Routledge, London, 1991), pp. 100–5.
- 74 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, (Oxford University Press, Oxford) sections 444–76, pp. 266–90; cf. Genevieve Lloyd, *Man of Reason*, pp. 80–5.
- 75 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Verso, London, 1983, revised edition 1991); Slavoj Žižek, 'Eastern Europe's Republics of Gilthead', *New Left Review* 183 (September–October 1990), pp. 50–62, reprinted in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *Dimensions of Radical Democracy* (Verso, London, 1991); cf. Jonathan Rée, 'Internationality', *Radical Philosophy* 60 (Spring 1992), pp. 3–11.
- 76 Most of the contemporary studies of the issue, including the works cited above, agree, despite their other differences, that nationalism is a comparatively recent phenomenon, hardly met with before the period of the French Revolution.
- 77 See the very illuminating discussions by G. J. Watson, *Irish Identity and the Literary Revival* (Croon Helm, London, 1979).
- 78 *Ibid.*, p. 24f.
- 79 Or so I myself have argued elsewhere, see 'Stephen Heroine' in *Troubled Pleasures* (Verso, London, 1991, pp. 246–68).
- 80 Patricia Coughlan, "'Bog Queens": the Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney', in *Gender in Irish Writing*, ed. T. O. Johnson and D. Cairns.

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NATURE AND SEXUAL
POLITICS

The terms, and political implications, of the tension I wish to address in this chapter have been well summed up by Jonathan Dollimore in his recent book on *Sexual Dissidence*, a work offering many insights on the ideological service that the concept of nature has been called upon to perform in the field of gender politics. In response to calls by socialists and those of a left-liberal persuasion for the injection of a new naturalism into Left thinking, he writes:

If, in the process of 'recovering' nature, Marxism or any other political movement ignores the violence and ideological complexity of nature as a cultural concept, it will only recover a nature imbued with those ideologies which have helped provoke recent crises. In short, there is a danger that much reactionary thought will return on the backs of nature and of those who rightly recognise ecological politics as of the utmost urgency. Of course, there are obvious and fundamental distinctions which can help prevent that – between human nature and the nature that is destroyed by human culture; between the ecological and the ideological conceptions of nature. But . . . they are distinctions which the concept traditionally slides across and between.¹

This seems a helpful formulation of the problem, because,

while it targets very precisely the potential site of abrasion between the 'nature-sceptical' critiques of a progressive gender politics, and the valorization of nature at the heart of ecological politics, it does so in terms which make clear that it would be no more appropriate for those whose primary interest is in sexuality to pit their 'nature' deconstructions against the ecological cause, than for ecologists to ignore the slidings of a signifier so central to their own concerns.

Dollimore's main concern is with the violence that has been done to homosexuals through the representation of their sexual practices as a crime against nature; and his own and other writings provide powerful illustration of the ways in which same-sex relations have been stigmatized and repressed on the grounds of their 'perversity'.² Indeed, homosexuality has been so persistently demonized as 'unnatural' that one can sympathize with the very extensive suspicion of the concept of nature within the gay community today and the reluctance of many gays to make use of the 'nature-endorsing' language of their opponents in promoting their own cause. Rather than have recourse to what Foucault has termed the 'reverse discourse' of self-authentication, wherein homosexuals began, in the nineteenth century, to contest their repression in the name of their own nature or naturalness, many would today follow Foucault in rejecting the very attempt to ground the discourse of the 'natural' and 'perverse' in some 'authentic' reality that it purportedly misrepresents. There is no 'nature' external to the cultural discourse that constructs its 'truth'.³ To seek to legitimate homosexuality in the self-same vocabulary by which it was medically disqualified is, they would argue, to give credence to the category of 'nature' responsible for its oppression, and to mistake the role it has played in the construction of the homosexual subject. Rather than persist in the idea of a natural or essential sexuality that has been socially

repressed, we should recognize the key role played by the discourse of 'nature' in constituting and endorsing certain sexual identities at the expense of others.

But it is not only gay theory and politics which has been resistant to the policing of sexuality through the concept of nature. So too has the feminist movement from its very origins, and, despite the very considerable spectrum of arguments that are found within it, they are united in rejecting the naturalisation of sexual hierarchy. The inaugural move of feminism, in fact, was the challenge it delivered to the presumed 'naturalness' of male supremacy – a challenge registered in that conceptual distinction between sex and gender, which, although now under attack as itself too ready to naturalise sex, became institutionalized within modern feminist theory, providing it with the cornerstone of its critique of patriarchy. Feminism, as it were, gets off the ground through a deconstructive move whose effect is to expose the discursive 'eterinizing' function of 'nature' in endowing with the seal of necessity what in reality is a matter of convention – and in this sense shares in the 'nature-scepticism' of much gay theory.

Yet in the case of feminism the tensions noted by Dollimore have a particular complexity because of the widely perceived congruence between the ecological and feminist agendas. Despite the pervasive resistance of feminism to any naturalization of gender relations, there has been an equally widespread sense that there is an overall affinity and convergence of feminist and ecological political aims. Patriarchal oppression has frequently been linked with those forms of rationality and technocratic values that ecologists cite as responsible for the domination and destruction of nature. Feminist critiques of mainstream, 'male' science and philosophy chime with ecological demands for a revision of 'anthropocentric' attitudes to humanity's place in the eco-system; the feminist emphasis on relational ethics is echoed in green arguments which

have highlighted the integration and mutual dependency of the eco-system.

Indeed, the ecological call for a re-thinking of our approach to the natural world has seemed not only to be consistent with, but in a sense to encompass, the feminist demand for an end to sexual hierarchy, and for a reevaluation of all those activities and dispositions traditionally linked with femininity. This prescriptive overlap, moreover, has a very obvious underlying rationale in the symbolic alignment of woman with nature. For just as ecological valorization of nature expresses dissent from Enlightenment conceptions of the natural and animal world as a lower order to be exploited in the interests of humanity, so feminism dissents from the idea of woman as a lesser type of human being whose subordination is explicable and justified by reference to male superiority. The respective critiques moved by ecology and feminism therefore reflect the ideological parallels in the conception of nature as bestial 'other' to human culture, and the conception of woman as inferior 'other' to man.

It is therefore not surprising that this communality of themes has found amalgamated expression in ecofeminist denunciations of the violation of 'mother' earth, whose feminine, nurturant powers, so long abused and suppressed by the hubris of male science and technology, are viewed as the energizing source of a renaissance at once both sexual and ecological. The emergence of a proper respect for nature is thus conceived as more or less coincident with a cultural prioritization of 'womanly' feeling and the establishment of a distinctively female orientated ethic.⁴

However, it is precisely with reference to such images of ecofeminist harmonization that many who count themselves as both feminist and green sympathizers have felt inclined to start talking about tensions, and bring some

ideological critique to bear. The main objection here has been that they reproduce the woman-nature equivalence that has served as legitimation for the domestication of women and their relegation to maternal and nurturing functions.⁵ As we have seen, too, the ideal feminization of the land has frequently served as the prop for a reactionary politics that would restrict the political and civil liberties of actual women.

There have been many feminist critiques of the ways in which the coding of femininity with naturality has served to justify the differential treatment of women, and to endow oppressive forms of polity with a mythologized aura of primordial authenticity, and I do not propose to add further to them here. Suffice it say that they are guided by a de-naturalizing impulse that puts them at odds with the altogether more nature-valorizing quality of ecological argument. This ideological tension, moreover, is reflected in divergencies of a more directly political character – for example, between feminism's generally favourable response to the interference in biology made possible by medical technology, at least in regard to contraception and abortion, and the ecological injunction to respect the rhythms and modalities of 'nature'. I am speaking here of a contrast in bias rather than of any necessary contradiction of approach. The forms of control represented by contraception and abortion are not at odds with the conceptions of good ecological management that inform what are sometimes referred to as the 'shallower' or more 'anthropocentric' currents of the Green Movement, since these latter – quite rightly in my opinion – have argued for the importance of harnessing technology in the preservation of nature, and deem the imperative to leave nature to its own devices to be both theoretically incoherent and practically disastrous. But they certainly represent an intervention in biological process that conflicts with those forms of submission to nature's ways recommended

in some of the more extreme versions of the 'eco-' or 'cosmo-centric' argument.⁶

This is not to deny a certain contrariness at the very heart of this conflict. Thus, the extreme anti-human speciesism promoted by a minority of 'deep' ecologists – their insistence on the subordination of human interests to those of other species – makes for a certain nonchalance about the preservation of *human* life of a kind clearly at odds with the 'pro-life' arguments of the anti-abortion lobby. Conversely, feminists who have relatively little problem defending the intervention in biology represented by birth-control or abortion, because of the 'rights to choose' that they afford to women, are often, by the same token, highly critical of a technocratic approach to medicine wherever they detect in this the hand of an invasive and disciplinarian 'male' science. One may surmise that feminist responses to the kinds of control over reproduction that genetic theory and bio-technology look likely to proffer in the future will embody similarly complex attitudes.

I make these points to indicate the range of disagreements and possible complexities of outlook that we are likely to encounter at the practical, political level, and in respect of specific policy issues, where there are many more divisions and ambiguities of position within and across the feminist and ecological camps than can be registered in the more general tension on which I want to focus here. But by addressing the general tension, we may become a little clearer about those 'fundamental' (though perhaps not so 'obvious') distinctions about nature which Dollimore suggests need to be observed if we are to reconcile the critiques of feminism and sexual politics with those of ecology. These are distinctions, I shall argue, that reveal not only the potentially reactionary dimensions of ecological naturalism, but also the limitations, and indeed ultimate incoherence, of the anti-naturalism professed in

contemporary approaches to sexuality. In other words, if the perspectives of the two camps are to be reconciled, the one may need the corrective of the other, or more precisely, both may need to reconsider their ways of talking about nature in the light of their respective critiques and political aims.

Confirming and Confounding Nature

Eco-politics, for its part, certainly needs to be alert to the implications for sexual politics of the emphasis it often places on the affinities between human beings and other animals. For this inevitably tends to abstract from critical differences in respect of the role played by language and symbolism in mediating human relations to biology. Animals, notably other primates, do indeed manifest sexual hierarchies, and appear to observe certain rules of intercourse, but it is only human beings, who, in virtue of language and conceptualization, can be said to experience themselves *as* sexual beings, with all the sources of pleasure and pain which that entails; and it is only human cultures that in any strong sense can be said to establish norms of sexual behaviour and sexual 'identity' in relation to whose codes and conventions all individuals must necessarily experience and organize their own sexuality, whether this be in conformity or resistance to them. To neglect these distinguishing features of human sexuality is to risk ignoring the varying, historical and constantly contested forms in which human beings experience their desires, their bodily existence and their functions in reproduction. To argue this is not to deny the biological basis of these cultural variants or the role played by a specifically human biology of sexuality in both circumscribing and enabling the forms they can take. Human beings, like all other living creatures, are determined by biology in

the sense that they are embodied, mortal entities with specific genetic endowments, and possessed of a particular sexual anatomy and physiology. But relative to other animals, and in part in virtue of their specific biological evolution, they are biologically under-determined in respect of the ways in which they will experience and respond to these conditions. The 'violence' that has been done through the cultural concept of nature must be associated with the refusal to respect these distinctions, and it is therefore important that ecological argument avoids talking about the 'communality' of humans and animals in ways that conflate the biological and cultural and symbolic dimensions.

It also needs to recognize the extent to which any romantic critique of industry and modernity is working within a binary structure of attitudes to nature, which is problematic from a gender point of view. This is a binary structure within which nature is both degraded and exalted: viewed both as the mere instrument of human self-fulfilment, and as the locus of an order and beauty imperilled by the feverish quest for transcendence. But since nature has also in an overall sense been coded 'female', the structure incorporates contradictory attitudes to femininity itself, which is either that from which masculinity must assert its autonomy and separation, or that untroubled state of wholesomeness and innocence to which it would return. Femininity is in this sense both that which it is desirable to transcend and that state of immanent self-oblivion which is sacrificed in the act of transcendence – and both these representations are offensive to women.

To the extent, then, that ecology reveres nature and subscribes to the positively accented conceptions of it, it may be dissociating itself from the explicit insult to women embodied in utilitarian-instrumental approaches to the use of nature, but it is less obviously distancing itself

from the more tacit disdain implied by 'her' sentimentalization as the innocent and desirable other to a distinctively human rapaciousness. For whether nature is viewed as sublime other that has been lost to human culture, or as mere instrument of its advance, 'her' space is still defined in opposition to that which is characteristically 'human'. For this reason, as various critics have suggested, an ecofeminist politics that calls on us to celebrate previously derided 'feminine' values, or that would look to that feminine 'difference', which culture has hitherto excluded, as the site of renewal, does not necessarily go very far in de-gendering the implicitly masculinist conception of humanity that has gone together with the feminization of nature.⁷ Any eco-politics, in short, which simply reasserts the claims of 'nature' against its 'human' dominion, is at risk of reproducing the implicit identification of the species with its male members in its very denunciations of 'humanity'.

On the other hand, there is something equally questionable about the extreme forms of anti-naturalism that have been voiced by some theorists of gender and sexuality. I am referring here to that culturalist or constructivist orientation that has denied not only the naturalty of gender, but that of sex and the body as well, thereby challenging the very distinction between sex and gender that I earlier suggested has provided the conceptual groundwork of modern feminist theory. Such arguments have been polemically defended in the writing of Monique Wittig and Christine Delphy, and are sustained and elaborated in a good deal of Foucaultian-influenced theory at the present time. For Wittig and Delphy, there are no extrinsic biological determinations on selfhood and sexuality, and, although people may come equipped with different genitalia and so-called secondary sexual characteristics, it is already to have endowed this equipment with a cultural genderism to have accorded it such a central

significance in determining subjectivity. As Delphy has put it:

Feminists have been shouting for at least twelve years, and still shout, whenever they hear it said that the subordination of women is caused by the inferiority of our natural capacities. But, at the same time, the vast majority continue to think that 'we musn't ignore biology'. But why not exactly?⁸

Wittig and Delphy have come under attack for the inconsistency of their use of such anti-essentialist arguments to defend a 'lesbian body' and erotic sensuality that they present as in some sense more authentic, dare one say 'natural', to female being.⁹ But insofar as such attacks target the inconsistent application, rather than the tenets, of their anti-naturalism, they share its basic premises and would insist, rather, that it is the radical non-fixity of sexual identity, lesbian or otherwise, that has been exposed by these critiques of the sex-gender divide. Thus Judith Butler has drawn on Foucault's arguments to lend force to Wittig's rejection of 'sex' as a category produced in the interests of the heterosexual contract, and would have us view the sex-gender distinction as reinforcing of sexual identity and modes of relating that are constraining on the complex and shifting subject places we might otherwise choose to occupy. Sex, she argues, is the construct of gender discourses and practices that seek to ground themselves in a pre-discursive 'nature', and feminist critiques that would 'merely' expose the distortions and misrepresentations of the stereotyping gender discourses are themselves repeating the cardinal distortion of viewing sex as pre-cultural and prior to gender.¹⁰ She and others working within a Foucaultian framework have also been highly critical of any conception of the body as 'natural'. Butler herself has taken issue with the residue of this idea in Foucault's invocation of bodily 'forces' and

would insist that the body be theorized as an entirely culturally constructed set of signifying surfaces.¹¹ Others have simply read Foucault as denying the naturalness of the body and pressed their case in the light of this idea. Thus Susan Bordo invokes his argument against any view of the body as a set of natural 'instincts' repressed or distorted by cultural forms:

Rather, there is no 'natural' body. Cultural practices, far from exerting their power *against* spontaneous needs, 'basic' pleasures or instincts, or 'fundamental' structures of bodily experience, are already and always inscribed, as Foucault puts it, 'on our bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations and pleasures'. Our bodies, no less than anything else that is human, are constituted by culture.¹²

'For Foucault' writes another of his followers, 'bodies are fabricated historically', and his work 'holds out the tantalizing promise of bodies whose truth is not ultimately the truth of sexuality or sex.' One must question, she argues, 'whether it is possible to use biological "sex" and not be trapped by some notion of "nature".'¹³

Arguments of this stamp do not object to invocations of nature and biology simply on the grounds of the ideological use to which they have been put in authenticating certain norms of sexual conduct. They refuse to allow that there is any natural dimension at all to human subjectivity, bodily existence or sexual disposition. They are therefore at odds with all those critiques that have focused on the ways in which culture has been gender biased or repressive of bodily need or sexual desire. Contesting though they do the *supposed* naturalness of current sexual practices and institutions, their extreme conventionalism on nature, strictly speaking, denies them any basis either for justifying this critique of existing practice, or for defending the more emancipatory quality of the alternatives they would

institute in its place. For if there are, indeed, no 'natural' needs, desires, instincts, etc., then it is difficult to see how these can be said to be subject to the 'repressions' or 'distortions' of existing norms, or to be more fully or truly realized within any other order of sexuality. The prescriptive force of these critiques is thus systematically undermined by their insistence on the arbitrary and purely politically determined character of the divide between the supposed givens of nature and the impositions of culture. Their denunciations of the 'merely' normative character of specific forms of sexual institution is, in other words, directly incompatible with their ontological anti-realism. Equally, of course, such anti-naturalism is at loggerheads with ecological realism and with any argument appealing to the nature we share in common with the rest of the animal world, or to our biological dependency upon the eco-system.

Rhetoric and Realism

The source and quality of these incompatibilities may be best illuminated by way of certain discriminations in the use of the term 'nature' that are seldom observed in the discourse of either sexual politics or ecology. Importantly, it seems to me, one must distinguish between the ways in which these arguments on sex and the body conflict with ecology in virtue of their resistance to a *monist* or *naturalist metaphysics*, and the ways they do so in virtue of their *anti-realism* about nature. In an overall way, I shall be arguing that it is anti-realism rather than metaphysical anti-naturalism that is the major obstacle to any rapprochement of the two perspectives, even though it is the presumption of much green thinking that the development of responsible policies on the environment requires the adoption of metaphysical naturalism. At the same time, I shall be arguing that insofar as a theory

of sexuality and the body denies a realist conception of nature, it is not only incompatible with ecological thinking, but incoherent in itself.

By metaphysical anti-naturalism I refer to the view (discussed more fully in chapter 2) that human culture constitutes a quite distinct order from that of the rest of animality, and cannot be adequately accounted for in terms of the latter. According to this view, all attempts to explain human attributes and capacities by reference to what human beings share with other primates are inherently reductive, and fail to respect what is specific to humanity. Culturalist approaches to gender and sexuality that have emphasized the distinctiveness to human culture of language and symbolization, and resisted any by-passing of their role in the construction of desire and behaviour, presuppose a duality of realms in this sense and are thus underpinned, whether it is explicitly acknowledged or not, by an anti-naturalist metaphysics.

It is, as suggested, precisely this dualist approach to the culture-nature divide that is usually deemed inimical to green concerns and that is frequently cited as the source of those 'instrumental' and 'anthropocentric' attitudes which have brought about the destruction of nature, and which we must now revise. A great deal of ecological argument, in other words, presumes that the desired change in our approach to nature can only come about through a better appreciation of our communality with it. The adoption of a naturalist metaphysics, which recalls us to our affinities with other species and emphasizes our continuity with, rather than distinctness from, the rest of nature, has therefore commonly been viewed as an essential aspect of any improvement in environmental policies.

Now, the dualist position has indeed frequently served to legitimate the abuse of animals and destructive appropriations of natural resources. It is by no means obvious, however, that any devaluation or misuse of nature auto-

matically follows from the insistence on our difference in kind from the rest of organic and inorganic nature – which might equally, in principle, provide the grounds for emphasizing our special responsibilities and pastoral role towards it. It does not logically follow from the fact that we think ourselves as different from – or even superior to – the rest of nature that we shall maltreat it; it follows only that, if we are looking for reasons to justify the maltreatment, this may be one that gets invoked. Conversely, anti-dualism may be invoked in support of more or less responsible eco-attitudes: either in defence of the idea that we should grant ourselves no privileged status *vis-à-vis* other animals and inorganic being, and hence no special rights over the use of nature, or else to argue that human beings are no more able than any other of nature's creatures to transcend their particular mode of doing things, however ecologically destructive this may have proven to be. The issues involved here are pursued further in the following chapter, and I would here insist only that there would seem to be no necessary entailment between being green in one's politics and being monist in one's metaphysics. In this sense, I think there is no inherent contradiction between the anti-naturalism that underlies much contemporary theory of gender and sexuality (its insistence, that is, on the irreducibly symbolic dimension of culture and on the essential differences it introduces between human and animal orders), and respect for ecological priorities.

What is, however, critical to any compatibility here is a proper recognition of nature in the 'realist' sense, by which I mean nature as matter, as physicality: that 'nature' whose properties and causal processes are the object of the biological and natural sciences. To speak of 'nature' in this conception is to speak of those material structures and processes that are independent of human activity (in the sense that they are not a humanly created product), and

whose forces and causal powers are the necessary condition of every human practice, and determine the possible forms it can take.¹⁴ Such a concept of nature as the permanent ground of environmental action is clearly indispensable to the coherence of ecological discourse about the 'changing face of nature' and the need to revise the forms of its exploitation. But it is also essential to the coherence of any discourse about the culturally 'constructed' body and its continually changing gender 'significations'.

If those denying the 'naturalty' of sex and the body are inviting us to deny their physical reality, then they are committed to a form of idealism that is clearly incompatible with ecological argument. But they have purchased the 'freedom' of human sexual practice from any dependency on or determination by biology only at the cost of sacrificing all explanatory and prescriptive force. For to deny nature in the realist conception would be to render any form of culturalist theory or politics quite meaningless. The very emphasis on the variable and culturally relative quality of human sexuality requires as its counterpart a recognition of the more constant and universal features of embodied existence as a condition of its coherence. If the body is viewed as entirely the historical effect of cultural powers, then no plausible explanation can be given of why it is that all human bodies are subject to processes of growth, reproduction, illness and mortality; nor would it make sense to challenge the effects of the imposition of any specific cultural 'norm' or discipline upon their experience, to speak of a controlling intervention in those processes or use of the body in displaying or contesting specific gender identities. The very demand for a shift in the significance accorded to a difference of sexual anatomy and function presupposes what the constructivists purport to deny: that there is an extra-discursive and biologically differentiated body upon which culture goes to work and inscribes its specific and mutable gender text. There is

in fact no possible understanding we can bring to the idea of the body as a site of gender inscription if we do not presuppose the body as natural organism subject to causal processes of a continuous and constant kind: to those processes that allow us through surgery or cosmetics or dieting or 'body-building' to alter bodily shape and appearance in accordance with (or in defiance of) social norms of beauty and gender identity; which, for example, cause amenorrhoea as a consequence of fasting; or make possible the pleasures of sexuality, however and with whomsoever enjoyed. It is precisely this conception of the body as a natural organism that must inform the idea of its being 'produced' (confined, disciplined, distorted . . .) by discursive formations and social and sexual norms and powers. It is only if we recognize the body in its transhistoric natural properties that it makes sense to advocate a 'stylistics' of gender as a means of parodic contravention of existing norms.

I submit, then, that a good deal of anti-naturalist talk is politically incoherent if taken literally. Perhaps, then, it is to be construed in a more rhetorical sense: what is being denied is not the existence of a natural body in the realist sense, but the assumption that the phenomenally experienced body – the body of 'lived experience' is natural. Indeed, it seems difficult to interpret Foucault's own claims in any other way, since he precisely refers to an 'inscription' of cultural practices upon a natural body (a body described in terms of 'materiality', 'force', 'energy', 'sensation' and 'pleasure'). But if we are charitable and construe denials of the naturalness of the body in this sense, then what exactly is being argued – what is the force of the vocabulary of 'construction' and 'production'? Why should we not refer to the body of lived experience as a 'natural' (albeit culturally conditioned) entity in order to distinguish it from those objects that are 'products' or 'constructions' out of realist nature (watches, nappies,

computers, etc.), unless it is being assumed that bodies are no less artefactual than such articles, and that cultural forces construct them in the same manner in which watches etc. are put together? But if this is what the Foucaultians intend by their anti-naturalist rhetoric, then they are surely inviting us to make an extremely mistaken comparison, since what differentiates the body as it is lived from any artificially constructed object is precisely the fact that it is a vital organism that is experienced subjectively. Both bodies and watches might be said to be objects in the sense of occupying space and both, I have suggested, are natural entities in the realist sense of being composed of physical matter, but the body is natural in the further sense that it is not an artificial construct but a subject-object, a being that is the source and site of its own experience of itself as entity. To employ a vocabulary that invites us to overlook these differences and to view the embodied subject as the wholly objective product of cultural forces is paradoxically to deny that element of lived experience and creative 'self-making' essential to the political force of the constructivist critique.

It is also to elide important distinctions between two rather differing ways in which culture may be said to 'work' upon nature – between those that involve the cultural processing of what is naturally produced and reproduced, and must necessarily exist in some form prior to that cultural work upon it, and those that make use of natural materials to inaugurate a product which previously did not exist. The body is in this sense not a 'product' of culture but a creation of nature whose existence is the condition of any cultural 'work' upon it, whereas an entity such as a watch comes into being only in and through its 'construction'; and while watches are once and for all made as finished products, bodies are not, but remain continuously in the making, either as a consequence of what we deliberately contrive ourselves or

as a result of involuntary processes (of ageing, disease, hormonal change, cell-renewal, etc.).

Moreover, if we do follow the suggestion of the constructivist rhetoric and view all embodied existence and sexual practice as equally artefactual, then some critically important distinctions between 'invented' and 'non-invented' nature will simply not be registered. There is, for example, a considerable difference in the modes whereby culture may be said to 'inscribe' or 'construct' the body. The 'inscriptions' of dress or cosmetics are rather different from the transformations effected through drill or exercise, dieting or drug use; nor are the latter of the same order as those achieved through surgical intervention. But there is also a considerable difference between any of these interventions or *re-makings* of the body and the making of entirely new organisms of the kind permitted by recombinant DNA technology (which has led to the inclusion of plant and animal varieties within the patenting laws precisely on the grounds that they are now considered as 'inventable').¹⁵ Given the potential, and the dangers, of the genetic engineering capacity to 'invent' (and patent, and hence privately own and exploit) bits of nature, it seems important not to cloud the issues of bio-politics raised in this area by suggesting that culturally conditioned transformations of bodily and sexual being are on a par with the constructions of the laboratory.

What I am trying to highlight here is the conceptual poverty of the constructivist refusal to discriminate properly between those forms of being (bodies, geographical terrain) that are culturally transmuted and those kinds of things (telephones, aeroplanes) that are indeed culturally 'constructed' and have a natural existence only in the realist sense that they are constructed out of natural materials (though often highly processed ones). The distinction here is not between forms or entities that have or have not been culturally affected, but between those forms

or entities that are natural in the sense that we have no choice but to experience them in some form prior to whatever form we impose upon them, and those that we literally bring into being. Bodies and landscape may be said to be culturally formed in the double sense that they are materially moulded and transformed by specific cultural practices and in the sense that they are experienced through the mediation of cultural discourse and representation. But they are not artefacts of culture, and it is no more appropriate to think of bodies and sexualities as the 'construct' of cultural practice and discourse than it is to think of the landscape as 'constructed' out of agricultural practices or as the discursively constituted effect of Romantic poetry.

On the other hand, if the culturalists are dismissing the naturality of the body, gender and sexuality only on the mistaken assumption that in regarding them as natural we are implying that they are entirely biologically determined and unaffected by cultural norms and interventions, then there would seem to be less incompatibility between ecology and sexual politics. This is because for the most part when the ecologists speak of nature meaning the environment and many of its resources (forestry, waterways, much plant and animal life) they are speaking about what is very obviously and recognizably a product of human cultivation and transformation upon nature in the realist sense. The reference, in short, is to a nature that is itself a work of *agriculture* rather than to some hypothetical humanity-free zone or essential being that is clearly disconnected from the impact of humanity. What is more, the nature in question here ought not to be spoken of as if it were the product of some universal 'human' subject, since it has acquired the form it has only in virtue of divisive and inequalitarian social and sexual relations of production, in other words, in virtue of historically specific cultural forces.

It is true that these points about the 'culturality' of nature are not always as well appreciated as they should be in eco-political discourse, where appeals to nature can draw on, and reinforce, reactionary use of the concept to 'eternize' class and gender divisions. On the other hand, the extreme constructivist position on gender and sexuality is also guilty of lending itself to regressive forms of thinking. Constructivists are clearly loath to allow any reference to nature or biology for fear of opening the floodgates to biological determinism and its political ideologies. But to take all the conditioning away from nature and hand it all to culture is to risk re-trapping ourselves in a new form of determinism. If we are disallowed any appeal to natural needs, instincts, pleasures and pains, we remove the objective grounds for challenging the authority of custom and convention, and must accept that it is only on the basis of personal preference (or prejudice) that we can contest the 'necessity' of a practice such as clitoridectomy or foot-binding, challenge the oppression of sexual minorities, or justify the condemnation of any form of sexual abuse or torture. Though promoted in the name of freeing the subject from the policing of cultural norms, post-structuralist conventionalism ends up by ceding to culture that very right to arbitrate between what is or is not 'natural' that its progressive aspirations require it to deny. Nor can any theory that presents all sexual need and desire as the 'construct' of culture offer any convincing account of the source of the existential freedom requisite to its recommended policy of 'gender invention'. Indeed, if gender identity is entirely disconnected from sex and sexuality, it is not clear what constitutes a distinctively *gendered* practice, signification or behaviour in the first place, or how we could distinguish between those performances that are manifestations of gender identity and those that are not.¹⁶

Conversely, there is no reason to suppose that biology

always exercises its determinations in the form of a negative coercion on the subject, as opposed to a liberating impulse, or that it must impose itself in the form of a simple unbrookable necessity. It is surely better viewed as both limiting and empowering. Human biology is such that we cannot fly unaided, exist on a diet of grass, survive for more than limited periods without air or water, emit or detect certain sounds or smells, and so on; but it is also such as to have allowed us language, agriculture, music-making, medicine, the development of a vast array of skills whereby we have evaded or transcended purely biologically imposed limits on our means of transport and communication, enjoyment and survival (and one is not here speaking simply of the achievements of 'scientific' or 'developed' societies since it is equally pertinent to consider those of other cultures in the light of these forms of transcendence of nature). The specific constraints of human biology will always pre-empt the development of certain capacities that 'come naturally' to other beings. But it is also in virtue of their particular biological evolution that human beings have developed quite exceptional powers to intervene and deflect the course of nature. In this sense we may speak of them as endowed with a biology that has enabled them to escape the 'necessity' of nature in a way denied to other creatures: to live in ways that by comparison are extremely undetermined by biology. But the correlate of this, of course, is their over-determination by cultural modes and conventions whose fixities and limitations on action can be just as exacting as any imposed by nature. Those who are phobic about allowing any reference to what nature 'proposes' in their accounts of human society for fear of licensing determinism might do well to consider the import of this on their own preference for culturalist explanation. For what culture 'deposes' has often proved so entrenched and permanent in its effects as to constitute no less an

order of determination. Our developed powers over nature have brought about a situation in which we are today far more at the mercy of what culture enforces than subject to biological dictate. Much of the famine, dysentery, blindness and other 'miseries' afflicting the more impoverished sectors of the world could be easily eradicated were it not for the intransigence of the social forces responsible for perpetuating their conditions of existence.

As far as sexuality is concerned, moreover, we might note that it is very often easier to counter or alter what is genetically determined than to disturb or transform the codes and conventions of culture. As the Foucaultian argument effectively recognizes, one can more readily alter the body in order to bring it into conformity with existing ideals of gender appearance than change the cultural prescriptions themselves. These remarks are not intended to imply that we should accept such cultural enforcements as inevitable givens, which would be precisely to succumb to those forms of ideological naturalization of what is socially instituted that the culturalists so rightly object to. They are intended only to challenge the presumption implicit in a good deal of constructivist argument that what is culturally instituted is necessarily always more temporary and readily manipulable than the givens of biology – and always in some sense less regressive or constricting. One can only successfully expose those reactionary cultural forces that have been falsely defended as natural from a position that acknowledges the extent to which these are themselves 'unnatural' impositions: cultural dispositions that take too little account of the exactions of natural needs and desires.

Clearly the 'violence' that has been done through 'nature' is not the effect of nature itself, however little we may relish some of the forms of our subordination to it (pain, illness, death); the problem lies in the *arbitrary and prejudicial* use of the concept to police

and suppress specific forms of sexual practice and bodily behaviour that do not themselves do violence or injury to others or involve them in acts against their will. It is therefore paradoxical that those who are most concerned to pre-empt this prejudicial use should lend themselves to modes of thinking that collapse the distinction between an order of cultural determinations and those naturally given features (the capacity to experience pain or humiliation) that justify the condemnation of violence and explain our resistance to it. There may be certainly a case for eschewing the vocabulary of the 'natural' and the 'perverse' in view of the ways it has been used quite unjustifiably to repress and marginalize sexual practices that are no more problematic in terms of their potential for pleasure or pain than the 'norms' to which they are contrasted. But it would still be important to distinguish between what is consented to and what is not, what is mutually enjoyed or enjoyable and what is not. Even if we are reluctant to speak of rape, sexual torture or child abuse as 'unnatural', we would still want to appeal to biological and psychological properties in explaining a resistance to these forms of violence and a refusal to licence them.

Conclusion

I have suggested in this survey that the coherence of ecological and feminist and sexual politics, and the comparability of their respective arguments, depends on the degree to which they are prepared to acknowledge and discriminate between a number of different conceptions of 'nature' or 'naturality' that they either explicitly or implicitly deploy. In conclusion, I shall here attempt to summarize the main implications.

A first implication is that a realist concept of nature is, whether it is avowedly admitted or not, presupposed

to both kinds of argument, as designating those physical and physiological structures and processes to which we remain subject in all our cultural practices, whether it is the human subject or the non-human environment that is the primary site of these. But a more empirical concept of 'nature' and 'naturalness' is also essential to both as a means of distinguishing between what is culturally processed and what is more literally 'constructed'; as a means, that is, of demarcating between the matter we transform, and the articles that we bring into being and that have existence only in virtue of that productive activity. Neither bodies (human or non-human), nor raw materials, nor wilderness, nor rural landscape are produced in this sense, and to that extent it is valid to refer to them as 'natural' entities and to recognize their dependency on causal laws and processes we cannot seek to overthrow. But to refer to them as 'natural' in this sense is not to imply that they have been unaffected by human culture, or to deny that they often acquire the form they do only in virtue of cultural activity.

A further implication is that, while we shall always have to live with the consequences of our cultural transformations (or perish as a result of them), nature does not, or only very minimally, determine the modes in which we respond to its limits and potentials. It may 'recommend' certain types of action, and it will always have its say in determining the effects of what we do, but it does not enforce a politics. Heterosexual relations, for example – which are often presented in contemporary feminist and gay writing as an arbitrary and coercive 'norm' of human sexual conduct – are a prescription of nature in the sense that they have been essential to the reproduction, and thus the history, of the species. But while biology has dictated that we cannot reproduce ourselves through same-sex relations, it has not dictated the political persecution of those relations, nor, given the

persistence and extent of the preference experienced for these, has it ever given us any basis for presenting them as abnormal. Nor, one might add, has it given us any grounds for persecuting homosexuality on the basis of its non-procreative function.

Finally, we might note that just as it is mistaken to present the biology of human reproduction as if it had compelled the power relations and social institutions through which it has historically been organized, so it would be mistaken to describe natural desires or sexual promptings as directly forcing human beings into any particular form of sexual union. Human beings differ from other animals not only in the forms of their engagement in sexuality (which are irredeemably symbolic, orchestrated through fantasy, self-reflexive and consciously pursued for interests other than procreation), but also in the forms of their disengagement from it (willed self-restraint, celibacy, political separatism). It is moreover, in principle possible for us to attempt, as some feminists have suggested we might, to avoid or circumvent the heterosexual contacts involved in 'natural' reproduction. But this would certainly not be to escape the determination of biology. On the contrary, any such programme would demand the most extensive knowledge of biological law and process, and obedience to their dictate. The point is only that nature is not going to prevent the attempt to implement a project of this kind, if it were to prove a general political choice, and thus far, it may be said, nature does not determine our sexuality and sexual behaviour. The same goes for ecology, where nature will have its come back, as it were, on whatever we do or try to do, and will to some extent constrain what we *can* try on, but it will not set any but rather elastic limits on this; it will not specify how Promethean our ambitions can be, nor how foolish it may be always to seek to promote human welfare through technological manipulation. It will not, for example, inform us whether

it is wise to think of 'terraforming' Mars, whether there will be any gain in human happiness were we to succeed in doing so, let alone whether it will have been morally right to have pursued it in that way.¹⁷

Indeed, it is the parallels here with contemporary gender debates that are more striking than the divergencies. For just as the real issue in dispute in the former is not the existence of biological processes, structures and regularities, but how far these do, or should be allowed to, determine and limit what we can be and experience as subjects, so the real and serious differences among the ecologists concern not the existence of nature as physical matter and process, but how we should harness and employ these powers, and in particular about what limits, if any, they do, or should be allowed to, set on human activity.¹⁸ And in both cases, I think it has to be recognized that the debates only arise in the first place because nature is so relatively under-determining of human culture and choice of life-style.

But this is not to deny that there are needs that are universal and basic in the sense that their satisfaction is essential to the health and well-being of any human individual, or that suffering will be the inevitable consequence of the pursuit of policies that ignore these determinations of nature. Nor does it mean that we can do whatever we choose to the environment and still expect the planet or ourselves to survive and flourish, and the same is surely true in respect of gender and sexuality. Many arrangements in this area that were previously deemed to be necessary because 'naturally' dictated have now come to be regarded as merely matters of entrenched convention, and hence transformable, and there is no reason in principle why this process of reconceptualizing as norms of conduct what society earlier presented mistakenly as facts of 'nature' should not continue to inform our thinking about sexuality and gender relations, prompting

as it does so ongoing changes in the institutions through which we live these dimensions of selfhood. But it is one thing to recognize our political powers in this respect, and technical capacities to act on them, another to suppose that we could ever escape the constraints that biological and psychological nature will impose on what we can in fact enjoy or experience as practically feasible or morally acceptable. If the request to respect nature or to value its truth is construed in these terms, then it is perfectly valid; indeed without it, it would seem impossible even to begin to make those 'fundamental' distinctions between human nature and the nature destroyed by human culture, or between 'ecological' and 'ideological' conceptions of nature, that Dollimore rightly sees as being so important to disentangling the oppositions of contemporary theory around the concept of 'nature'.

Notes

- 1 Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991), pp. 114–15.
- 2 *Ibid.*, esp. chs 13–16 and bibliography; on the 'construction' of gay and lesbian identity, see Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain, from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (Quarier, London, 1977); *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* (Longman, London, 1981); *Sexuality and its Discontents: Meaning, Myths and Modern Sexualities* (Routledge, London, 1985); *Sexuality* (Tavistock, London, 1986); David E. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1988); Celia Kitzinger, *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* (Sage, London, 1987). For powerful attacks on the coercive 'norm' of heterosexuality, see Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' in *The Signs Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Abel and Emily K. Abel (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1983); Sheila Jeffreys, *Anticlimax* (The Women's Press, London, 1990); see also works cited in notes 6 and 8.

3 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: an Introduction*

(Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1978), p. 101; cf. Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, pp. 225-7, 233-4; Kate Soper, 'Productive Contradictions' in *Up Against Foucault*, ed. Caroline Ramazanoglu (Routledge, London, 1993), pp. 33-5. My remarks here are not intended to imply that Foucault's work is exclusively responsible for the development of a 'social constructionist' approach to the history of homosexuality. While noting the 'spectacular' impact of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* on gay studies, Jeffrey Weeks points out that his own, and other works adopting a 'constructionist' approach, preceded its appearance, and that 'it can now be seen that Foucault's *History* owes a great deal to work that was already going on independently of him' (see *Coming Out*, pp. xi-xii).

4 This is a very summary account of some of the key thematics of the more essentialist vein of ecofeminist argument. For a fuller sense, see *Healing the Wounds: the promise of ecofeminism*, ed. Judith Plant (Green Print, London, 1989); *Reweaving the World: the emergence of ecofeminism*, ed. Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein (Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, 1990); *The Politics of Women's Spirituality*, ed. Charlene Spretnak (Anchor, New York, 1982). Ecofeminism, it should be said, comprises a spectrum of philosophical and political positions not all of which would accept the more essentialist versions of the argument.

5 See Janet Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (South End Press, Boston, 1991), esp. pp. 1-28; Joan Cocks, 'Wordless Emotions: Some Critical Reflections on Radical Feminism', *Politics and Society* 13, pp. 27-57. For an assessment of the oppressive dimensions of the woman-nature association conducted from within an ecofeminist perspective, see Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Routledge, London, 1993), ch. 1. See also Andrew Ross's reflections, *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life* (Verso, London, 1994), pp. 220-30.

6 This is not to imply that all those committed to a 'deep' perspective would endorse these forms of argument. 'Deep' ecology comprises a spectrum of positions and includes many within its ranks who would reject this kind of extreme 'hands off' approach to nature. For a survey of 'deep' ecological perspectives and bibliography on these, see Robert Sylvan, 'A Critique of Deep Ecology', *Radical Philosophy* 40 (Summer 1985), pp. 5-12. See also the discussion and works cited on nature as 'intrinsic value' in chapter 8.

7 Cf. Val Plumwood, 'Woman, Humanity, Nature', *Radical Philosophy* 48 (Spring 1988).

8 Christine Delphy, *Close to Home: a Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression* (University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1984), p. 23. Cf. Monique Wittig, 'The Straight Mind', *Feminist Issues* (Summer 1980), pp. 103-11; 'One is Not Born a Woman', *Feminist Issues* (Fall 1981); 'The Category of Sex', *Feminist Issues* (Fall 1982); *The Lesbian Body* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1973). For a discussion of Delphy's and Wittig's argument, see Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (Routledge, London, 1989), ch. 3.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 41-5. For some considerations of a more wide-ranging kind on sexuality and the 'authentic self' and the 'essentialism' of 'anti-essentialist' critiques in gender politics, see Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, esp. parts 3, 7.

10 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, London, 1990); cf. 'Variations of Sex and Gender' in *Feminism as Critique*, ed. Seyla Benhabib and Drusilla Cornell (Polity Press, Oxford, 1987), pp. 128-42; 'Gender Trouble' in *Feminism and Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (Routledge, London 1990), pp. 324-40.

11 Though her most recent work, *Bodies that Matter: The Discursive Limits of Sex* (Routledge, London, 1993) offers a more considered view, and represents, Butler herself has very recently claimed, a shift of position on the materiality of the body. See her interview with *Radical Philosophy* 67 (Summer 1994), pp. 32-9.

12 Susan Bordo, 'Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology and the Crisis of Culture' in Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (eds), *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance* (Northwestern University Press, Boston, 1988), p. 90.

13 M. E. Bailey, 'Foucauldian feminism: Contesting bodies, sexuality and identity' in *Up Against Foucault*, ed. Ramazanoglu, pp. 106-7, esp. p. 101.

14 For further discussion of the 'realist' conception of nature, see chapter 5.

15 See Peter Wheale and Ruth McNally (eds), *The Bio-Revolution: Cornucopia or Pandora's Box?* (Pluto, London, 1990), part I, and their jointly authored paper on 'Environmental and Medical Bioethics in Late Modernity: Anthony Giddens, Genetic Engineering and the Postmodern State' in *Philosophy and the*

- Natural Environment*, ed. Robin Attfield and Andrew Belsey (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994). See also their *Genetic Engineering: Catastrophe or Utopia?* (Wheatstheaf, London, 1988).
- 16 This is a point developed in criticism of Judith Butler's performance theory of gender by Sarah Charwin (unpublished Ph.D. thesis 'Habeas Corpus: theories of embodiment in the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and contemporary feminism').
- 17 NASA is currently investing large sums in the research and development of a project to create the atmospheric conditions on Mars which might, in a matter of centuries, allow it to support life-forms of the kind found on earth. See report in *Geographical Magazine*, February 1993; *The Guardian*, 4 February 1993. For a discussion of the environmental ethics of the project, see Keekok Lee, 'Awe and Humility: Intrinsic Value in Nature. Beyond an Earthbound Environmental Ethic' in *Philosophy and the Natural Environment*.
- 18 For an example of this debate on the 'limits' of nature, see the exchange between Reiner Grundmann and Ted Benton in *New Left Review* 178 (November–December 1989); Grundmann's reply, *New Left Review* 187 (May–June 1991); Benton's reply to Grundmann, *New Left Review* 194 (July–August 1992).

5

NATURE AND 'NATURE'

In the previous chapter, I offered some illustration of the tension between the nature-conservationist ethic of ecology and the anti-naturalist impulse of culturalist theory; and I opened up some channels for rethinking this apparent conflict of perspectives. I here want to extend on my argument, by elaborating on the theoretical discriminations that I have suggested they both need to address more fully, though I shall be focusing here primarily on ecological discourse about nature.

Let me begin by expanding a little on the claims of anti-naturalist theory to ecological attention. As we have seen, the endorsement of nature as a site of truth and intrinsic value may easily proceed at the cost of proper recognition of the reactionary use to which these ideas have been put in the field of sexual politics. But since the forms of naturalization of the social that are criticized by feminist and gay theory have very standardly been used to legitimate other hierarchies and structures of oppression, notably those of class and racial difference, this point must be generalized into a caution against any too ready invocation of 'nature' as the victimized 'other' of human culture. Given how largely the appeal to the preservation of a 'natural' order of intrinsic worth has figured in the discourse of social conservatism, an uncritical ecological naturalism is always at risk of lending ideological support to those systems of domination that have played a major