

Nature as Agency and the Prospects for a Progressive Naturalism

By Val Plumwood

1. The Issue

The deep contemporary suspicion and skepticism about the concept and term “nature” may play some role in the contemporary indifference to the destruction and decline of the natural world around us. If the category of “nature” is seen as phony, if it can appear only when suitably surrounded by sneer quotes, we are less likely to be inspired by appeals to nature’s integrity in the case against genetic engineering or for the defense of nature in the case for stopping the current slaughter of the seas and the holocaust of animal life. The more nebulous and indeterminate such nature-skepticism is, the more difficult to dispel is the general sense of unease the term “nature” seems to arouse in the modern, and especially the post-modern, mind. Even if that unease can be justified for some areas of usage, the danger is that it will contaminate perfectly defensible and useful, even indispensable, roles for concepts of nature, in a way that will make important conservation causes very difficult to articulate convincingly. Should we then abandon “nature” as the banner-term under which we might try to resolve the ecological crisis? I suggest the answer is no. One aim of this paper is to help distinguish between more and less problematic senses of “nature” and “naturalism.” I shall use the term “nature” here primarily in its dominant contemporary sense to mean the sphere of the nonhuman, although, as we shall see, that itself is not unproblematic.

This project of clarification may help clear away some of the difficulties of imagining a progressive or liberatory naturalism, that is, a project that aims to draw together oppositions to oppressive forms and narratives that have made use of the culture/nature or reason/nature dualisms. To the extent that this dominant culture has often coded and

treated the oppressed side as a form of nature,¹ a progressive politics based around a critical and partial affirmation of nature would seem appropriate, rather than a simple rejection of the coding itself (although in many cases both are required). There are various directions from which such a project of coalition or political convergence might be approached: in the hands of ecofeminist theorists, this objective has been based on the potential of the concept of nature, in its various historical guises, to support oppositions to a certain web of oppressive forms, oppositions that characteristically make up progressive politics. Ecofeminists among others have noted that many oppressed groups — including nonhumans, women, people of non-Western culture or races, those who perform manual or bodily labor, and others identified as of a lower, supposedly less rational class — have often been envisaged in Western culture as less human, as a form of nature or as closer to “nature,” in opposition to reason, culture, or civilization, the latter group of concepts often carrying a strong identification with privileged groups.²

The unificatory advantage and potential of progressive naturalism would be based on its ability to collect oppositions to a key set of centrism constructed around a version of the concept of reason (or a reason-based concept of culture), which includes a common cultural narrative that guides the selection and setting apart of privileged groups — that of the hyper-separation and superiority of reason to nature. As the One is to the Other, as male is to female, as modern rationalist culture is to cultures it defines as lesser, so are those identified with reason/human/civilization/ culture to those defined as closer to nature. Such a project of progressive naturalism might tap deep resonances and strong historical currents of opposition and resistance in Western

¹On this issue and on the dominant narrative see Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993); Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (London: Wildwood House, 1980); and Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (London: Routledge, 1996).

²See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth* (Minneapolis: Seabury, 1975); as Kate Soper remarks, “all Western discourses on nature, including those most critical of its abuse, carry with them the ethnocentric legacy of a metaphysical tradition that has covertly identified the ‘human’ side of the humanity-nature distinction with ‘civilised’/‘developed’ humanity,” Kate Soper, *What Is Nature?: Culture, Politics and the non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 10. The same can be said of course of nature’s dualized opposite number of reason, which however rarely receives the blame due to it in this connection. Both “nature” and “human” concepts have involved the formation of hegemonic wholes.

culture; it could, for example, connect usefully with some progressive forms of the romantic movement, sounding a warning note to the effect that the romantic connection can also serve to indicate some of the project's dangers.³

Such a project of progressive or liberatory naturalism faces many difficulties, which I discuss below. But even if it never overcomes these sufficiently to become a popular intellectual rallying point for liberatory politics, it is necessary to go a certain distance along the road to constructing it in order to understand the contemporary politics of nature. An investigation of the old tension between progressive and naturalistic politics can help to show us when and where we may need to adopt naturalizing versus denaturalizing strategies, as I explain below. And it can further the crucial cultural project of changing the dominant narrative and its leading characters of reason and nature.

The term “progressive naturalism” itself has contradictory overtones, since the concept of progress has long been defined as the adjunct of reason, the side opposing nature in the West's dominant cultural narrative of reason progressively mastering nature that justifies maximizing rational control of the earth. But on this account the terminology is all the more useful in flagging the intention of a liberatory synthesis that disrupts the reason/nature oppositions and narratives that have framed these concepts and defined their characteristics within a colonizing relationship of human-centeredness, with its attendant histories of domination, and projects of subsumption or assimilation. The tension in the idea of progressive naturalism, like that in the idea of “rational woman,”⁴ points to what cannot be articulated in a way consistent with the definitions established by the dominant framework. If naturalism aims to articulate a basically affirmatory, counter-cultural stance towards the natural (including the biological, corporeal, and material) world and our own human inclusion within it, the concept of progress might aim to flag naturalism's intended alliance with the liberatory politics of critical social change movements. For such an alliance to be successful, the concept of progress must be given a new role outside the dominant reason/nature narratives that have linked it with the mastery of nature. Reworking is necessary for several reasons. Despite current temptations to cynicism about the concept of progress, I do not favor any simple abandonment

³See Charlene Spretnak, *The Resurgence of the Real* (Reading MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997).

⁴Raia Prokhovnik, *Rational Woman: A Feminist Critique of Dichotomy* (London: Routledge, 2000).

of the concept as inevitably complicit in those dominant narratives; some concepts (like democracy and progress) are just too important to cede to the opposition. Reworking of progress concepts in different terms is part of a reworking of the dominant narrative or reason opposing nature and its leading concepts.⁵ And as Ted Benton has noted, the old oppositional story is more inappropriate than ever in these times: a concept of progress can no longer just be opposed to that of nature, but has to be redefined to recognize nature's limits.

Progressive naturalism requires that we disentangle the liberatory roles of the concept of nature from the anti-liberatory ones. This can be difficult. Culture/nature dualism hinders this disentangling project in several ways; it legitimates usages in which categorizing something as natural functions to rule out any social focus, any questioning or resistance. In anti-liberatory cases (which I will call conservative naturalism), the concept of nature is used to minimize the contribution of the social and thus the need for social change. Conservative naturalism seeks to naturalize oppression, invoking nature to universalize and justify, to depict as "natural" and unalterable oppressive arrangements that are actually contingent and quite open to change. In these cases, it may be objected initially that the inclusion of the relevant group, process or state in the category of nature in a way that excludes or demotes the role of the social or cultural is mistaken and ideologically motivated. But given the historical web of identification of oppressed groups with nature and its implications, this inclusion in the category of nature is rarely just a matter of innocent misclassification. The invocation of nature in such contexts often serves to suggest inevitability and exclude socio/cultural explanations and remedies, functioning in colonizing frameworks to naturalize inferior treatment.

Progressive naturalism may appear to be swimming against the current stream of progressive and constructivist positions that insist on full recognition of the social and cultural elements in human lives, in opposition to conservative naturalism and individualism. I will argue, though, that there is not only no necessary opposition between recognizing the hidden or denied social and cultural elements and recognizing the hidden or denied elements of agency in the sphere of nature, but that these two kinds of recognition mostly need and assist one another. Colonizing perspectives find the category of nature

⁵Progress can even be linked to the reworking of that narrative. For example, one aspect of progress might be seen as success in decolonizing and decentering concepts of the human and of reason.

serviceable both to suppress resistance and to hide certain kinds of (human and non-human) inputs they wish to appropriate, refusing to recognize the suppressed other's agency and creation of value, and assimilating relevant cases to that of nature. Usually this is possible because within the dominant narrative, *nature's agency as such* is denied, so that to be included within the category of nature is to be deprived of recognition as an agent. I discuss the logical dynamics of this important class of cases in detail in sections 2 and 3 below, arguing that it does not justify the dismissal or denial of the category of nature itself. Indeed, to the extent that nonhuman species have their own forms of culture, agency and autonomy, the exclusionary opposition between nature and culture is simply invalid, and depends on an oppressively reductionist and instrumentalist view of nonhuman animals (which may then be read back into selected human cases, to oppress them also).

Taking account of these cases of the use of the concept of nature to oppress, however, goes only part of the way towards explaining why many progressives in the conventional left sense have tended to be hostile to the idea of nature and seek everywhere to distance from it and to minimize its extent and importance. Progressive naturalism would insist that the conventional "realo" camp has ceded the concept and sphere of nature somewhat prematurely to the enemy. Other reasons for the traditional hostility of "progressives" towards nature include the tendency of the traditional left to frame their project in terms of some version of the dominant narrative of reason/nature dualism and domination. Within this narrative, movement out of the oppressed category can only be achieved by distancing from the sphere of nature and the oppressed condition of being coded as within it.⁶ To this we may add the influence of Marx, whose devaluation of the aspects of the human shared with other animals, of nature as a sphere of rural idiocy and cultural impoverishment, and of peasant revolution, is well known.⁷

Further motives for oppressed groups to derogate, and distance themselves from, nature as the non-human may include the repetition of

⁶For a discussion of this type of case, see Plumwood, 1993, *op. cit.*, and Val Plumwood, "Ecological Ethics from Rights to Recognition: Multiple Spheres of Justice for Humans, Animals, and Nature," in Nicholas Low, ed., *Global Ethics and Environment* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁷See Ted Benton, "Humanism=Speciesism? Marx on Humans and Animals," in Sean Sayers and Peter Osborne, eds., *Socialism, Feminism and Philosophy: A Radical Philosophy Reader* (London: Routledge, 1990).

the privileged gesture of exclusion directed towards a still-lower, more fully inferiorized group. This gesture of exclusion may form part of a case for inclusion into the more fully privileged categories, (e.g., fully “civilized” humans) or it may be an over-reaction to the misclassification or coding as nature that tends to form part of the mechanism of oppression.⁸ In some cases it may be based on the belief that it is best to minimize the number of outsiders (e.g., nonhumans) who can join privileged insider groups in the interests of maximizing the individual welfare of insiders (humans) and their ability to improve their lot by exploiting outsiders.⁹ Postmodern tendencies to dismiss or reduce the category of nature are discussed by Kate Soper in her 1994 book *What is Nature?*, and include the proclivity for reducing everything possible to culture. However, many postmodern concerns about essentialism and claims to cultural universalism point to important issues. When questions of different cultural relationships to “nature” are under discussion, vital questions may be begged unless we recognize that the concept of nature is a Western concept that is not culturally universal. Sometimes we can rephrase our concerns in more culturally pluralistic terms, for example as questions about different cultural relationships to land or (where relevant) to (specified parts of) the nonhuman sphere. And sometimes we should switch to a less homogenized set of contrasts and hegemonic wholes.

Any project of progressive naturalism faces major problems. It must avoid a reverse centrism of substituting nature for culture or reason in a new narrative of dominance that mimics and parallels the old, failing to reimagine with sufficient daring the identities and relationship the original narrative created. This tendency to reverse centrism, or domination of nature over reason, has sometimes afflicted parts of the romantic movement.¹⁰ The problems of an unreconstructed reverse affirmation as a solution to gender dualism are all too evident from the case of women, where an uncritical affirmation of “women’s virtues,” and of character ideals of womanliness defined in the private sphere, can serve to keep women as strongly regimented and home-

⁸See Plumwood, 1999, *op. cit.*

⁹This argument is put forward by Dennett as a reason for not letting too many animals into the rights club, see Daniel Dennett, *Kinds of Minds* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1996). For a critique see Val Plumwood, “Intentional Recognition and Reductive Rationality: A Response to John Andrews,” *Environmental Values*, 7, December 1998, and Plumwood, 1999, *op. cit.*

¹⁰See Ruether, *op. cit.*; and Spretnak, *op. cit.*

defined as ever. Any affirmation of nature requires the same kind and level of qualification, at the very least.

Another problem is that some of the key identifications with nature have waned as explicit doctrines at the ideological level, even if the oppression they once justified continues at the level of practice in different forms and guises. The idea that human others are less human because they are more natural or animal, is in many places now rarely expressed in bald terms. The Great Chain of Being hierarchy it once theorized has become one of the background resonances of the culture rather than a conscious contemporary doctrine we often meet out in the open. This does not mean that such webs of connections are unimportant — indeed to the extent that they are operative but not consciously so they are more rather than less dangerous and in need of exposure — but it means that complex and often abstract argument is required to establish at the political level the common ground any affirmatory stance towards nature might provide. This potential to recover common ground can be rendered problematic, too, by other developments, for example, the degree of horizontal violence between the oppressed groups such a naturalism might hope to solidarize.

Nevertheless exploring this potential common ground remains an important political project because of the structural similarities the dominant narrative of nature has bequeathed to the diverse forms of oppression it has justified. Nature provides the model in terms of which other denials are framed and excused, as its own prior agency is denied and overridden in the foundation of property.¹¹ Hegemonic conceptions of human agency are fostered in human-centered culture; these are linked to denials of dependency, which in turn are linked to the application of inappropriate strategies and forms of rationality that aim to maximize the share of the “isolated” self and neglect the need to promote mutual flourishing. Thus the One or Man of Property is able to assume the contribution of nature in the form of a continuing support base for production, accumulation and renewal, but to deny it in failing to recognize, and allow for, nature’s reproduction and continuation.¹²

A sufficiently careful and well-articulated form of nature affirmation might be able to negotiate these difficulties. The chief political problem for the present, though, one I address below in section 3, is to separate

¹¹For a more detailed argument that Locke’s formula subsumes the agency of nature see Plumwood, 1999, *op. cit.*

¹²It follows that “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” remains an incomplete specification, but the idea of identifying such a system by giving a list is in any case severely problematic.

with sufficient clarity and permanence the oppressive and the liberatory roles the concept of nature can play. Although there are reasons for skepticism about the project of using a reconstructed concept of nature as a political rallying point, it is an important clarificatory exercise, in attempting to meet this and other difficulties, to ask what reconstructions of the concept of nature might support such an affirmation. Naturalism in the form of some kind of recognition and affirmation of the larger nonhuman sphere and of our own animality¹³ needs sympathetic exploration as a necessary corrective to the excesses of many alternative strategies, including the post-modern and constructivist strategies of dispensing with nature (discussed in section 4 below), and the more traditional course of affirming the dominant side of the dualized nature/culture pair, in the form of humanism. Humanism must come to terms with an affirmation of the denied nonhuman side of the dominant human culture that is labelled nature if it is ever to find a satisfactory form for its human applications. The oppositional affirmation of and limited focus on human characteristics of humanism has supported both human inequality and human self-enclosure. It has helped us to lose touch with ourselves as beings who are not only cultural but also natural, embedded in the earth and just as dependent on a healthy biosphere as other forms of life.

Humanism is multi-faceted and can include potentially positive elements and aims such as human solidarity and equality. But the position has long been open to distortion and subversion in several respects: equality has been subverted by humanism's overemphasis on reason, which has allowed an elite-based rationalism to interpret its leading concepts of reason and nature to benefit a rational meritocracy, for example, through interpreting ideas of impartiality, universality and objectivity as involving the exclusion of care, compassion and emotionality. Second, the tendency to build concepts of human equality and solidarity on an exclusionary form of bonding defines the human in dualistic opposition to its Other, the hyperseparated contrast class of the nonhuman. Third, the doctrines of equality and justice these positions have enunciated have often been subverted by the insistence on a sharp, even emphatic, *boundary* to their inclusiveness. The exclusion of nonhumans from ethical and other forms of concern is a moral *boomerang* which too often returns to strike at humanity itself when supposedly "lower" orders of humans are assimilated to those beyond the boundary, to nature and to animals, as they have been

¹³See Ted Benton, *Natural Relations: Ecology, Animal Rights and Social Justice* (London: Verso, 1993).

systematically through much of Western history. All these human-supremacist features rebound against the project of human solidarity, and have been mobilized against those human groups associated with the excluded nonhuman class. Thus the second and third elements of exclusion have long done battle with the first element of equality and solidarity among humans. Humanism can only resolve these tensions by moving beyond its traditional exclusive focus on, and centralization of, humans, human agency and interests.

2. Distorting Dualisms and Hegemonic Constructions of Agency

“We ought to purge our environmental manifestos of the language of the ‘domination of nature’” writes Neil Smith,¹⁴ since domination of some sort is inevitable, he thinks. Smith seems to think this is so because use of technology, use of nature and influence on nature are all inevitable parts of human life. Yet none of these add up to “domination.” We can see this if we consider that technology, et al. are also an inevitable part of our interactive social relations — our relations with other human beings — where we concede (or should concede) that relations of domination are not inevitable.¹⁵ Stances of domination and mastery towards the nonhuman sphere seem inevitable to many people in Western culture because they form such a deep part of their framework of thought, and because they are often unfamiliar with alternative cultural patterns and frameworks. Also, the actual patterns of relationship that result from domination or mastery are rarely spelt out in sufficient detail to enable us to see how to escape them. Yet when they are, it is apparent that such relations are by no means inevitable and that understanding how domination shapes our concepts of, and relations to, nature is very important in understanding the ecological threats the culture of mastery is creating for itself.

Relationships of domination form identities of dominator and subordinated in major ways, and much of the patterns of relationship we can discern here appears to be common to both human and nonhuman relationships of domination. Relations of domination can take different forms; however, a well-established pattern for Western culture in the case of nature involves colonizing relationships justified by anthropocentrism, just as the intra-human relationships in which

¹⁴See Neil Smith, “The Production of Nature,” in *FutureNatural: Nature, Science and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 46 fn.

¹⁵See Val Plumwood, “Integrating Ethical Frameworks for Animals, Humans and Nature: A Critical Feminist Eco-Socialist Analysis,” *Ethics and the Environment*, 5, 3, 2000.

Europeans colonized the lands of those they believed to be lesser were justified and supported by Eurocentrism. In both cases, relationships of dualism or binary opposition are created around the identities of the One and the Other, in this case human and the nonhuman, and the Other is treated as something to distance from and subdue. A number of diverse elements can be involved here,¹⁶ of which I will discuss two that have a major bearing on contemporary blindspots in relation to the dependency of human culture on nature. The first of these is *hyper-separation*, an emphatic form of separation that involves much more than just recognizing difference. Hyper-separation means defining the dominant identity emphatically against or in opposition to the subordinated identity, by exclusion of their real or supposed qualities. The function of hyper-separation is to mark out the Other for separate and inferior treatment through a radical form of exclusion. Thus “macho” identities emphatically deny continuity with women and try to minimize qualities in themselves thought of as appropriate for women. Colonizers exaggerate differences (for example, through emphasizing exaggerated cleanliness, “civilized” or “refined” manners, body covering, or alleged physiological differences between what are defined as separate races or classes).¹⁷ They may ignore or deny relationship, conceiving the subordinated party as less than human. The colonized may be described as “stone-age,” “primitive,” as “beasts of the forest,” and contrasted with the civilization and reason attributed to the colonizer.¹⁸

Similarly, the human “colonizer” treats nature as radically Other, and humans as emphatically separated from nature and from animals. From an anthropocentric standpoint, the nonhuman sphere is a hyper-separate lower order lacking any real continuity with the human.¹⁹ This approach tends to lay heavy stress on those features which make humans different from nature and animals, rather than those they share with them, as constitutive of a truly human identity. Anthropocentric culture often endorses a view of the human as outside of and apart from a plastic, passive and “dead” nature which lacks agency and meaning. A strong ethical discontinuity is felt at the human species boundary, and an anthropocentric culture will tend to adopt concepts of what makes a

¹⁶For a summary see Plumwood, 1999, *op. cit.*

¹⁷On such a concept of “race,” see Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (Scranton, PA: W.W. Norton, 1981).

¹⁸For examples see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

¹⁹In some hybrid forms the key assumptions of discontinuity may take a more subtle form; thus in Roman Catholicism continuity is admitted at the level of the body but denied at the level of the mind or spirit, considered to be the level that defines the truly human.

good human being which reinforce this discontinuity by devaluing those qualities of human selves and human cultures it associates with nature and animality. Thus it associates with nature inferiorized social groups and their characteristic activities; women are historically linked to “nature” as reproductive bodies, and through their supposedly greater emotionality; indigenous people are seen as a primitive, “earlier stage” of humanity. At the same time, dominant groups associate themselves with the overcoming or mastery of nature, both internal and external to the human self.

To understand why such constructions are not inevitable, it is crucial to distinguish between separation and hyperseparation.²⁰ Countering hyperseparation of humans from nature implies recognizing continuity and hybridity between the human and the natural. It does not require us to deny nature’s otherness or separateness, or to deny or submerge human distinctness from other species, for example by the claim that humans are just “part of nature.” Humans *are* part of nature, in the sense that they are subject to ecological principles and have the same requirements for a healthy biosphere as other animals. However, they, like all other species, also have their own distinctive species identity and relationship to nature, including their own nature. This need not be, however, a relationship of domination, nor need the traits taken to characterize the human (e.g., language, rationality) be the only ones accorded esteem. To counter hyper-separation, we need a depolarizing reconception of nonhuman nature which recognizes the *denied space* of our hybridity, continuity and kinship, and is also able to recognize, in suitable contexts, the difference of the nonhuman in a non-hierarchical way. And we should be suspicious of hyperseparated senses of “nature,” since to be other (or separate, distinct) is not the same as to be purely other (or hyper-separated). A number of paradoxical and skeptical arguments trade on this ambiguity to make it seem that, because of the pervasiveness of human presence and influence, nature as the purely other, and therefore nature as such, does not exist. I discuss some of these arguments below.

Another very important feature of frameworks of domination is backgrounding, a form of simultaneous reliance on, but disavowal of, the agency of subordinated Others. When the dominating party comes to believe that they are radically different and superior to the subordinated party, they are also likely to devalue or deny the Other’s agency and their own dependency on this devalued Other, treating it as either inessential and substitutable or as the unimportant background to their

²⁰See Plumwood, 1993, *op. cit.*

foreground. Thus women's traditional tasks in house labor and childraising are treated as inessential, as the background services that make "real" work (the work of the male) and achievement possible, rather than as achievement or as work themselves. The conceptual means by which this simultaneous reliance and disavowal is accomplished is through the hegemonic construction of agency. In highly androcentric frameworks like that of Aristotle, women's reproductive agency was backgrounded as an adjunct or mere condition for real agency, which was claimed for the male reproductive role, the woman being merely "the nurse" for the male seed. Aristotle's age erased women as social and political agents, enabling Aristotle to disappear women's reproductive agency in his award of the reproductive ownership of the child to the father. Aristotle saw the father as contributing the rational element of form as compared to the mother's contribution of mere matter. In this hegemonic construction the father emerged as the only active agent in a reproductive situation which we now conceive as normally involving joint and mutual agency.

Splitting or hyperseparation and backgrounding or denial work together to produce typical hegemonic constructions of agency. This is well illustrated in the Marglins' study of dominating forms of knowledge.²¹ Knowledge which in some cultures remains integrated and fully embodied is in Western cultures often split into a superior abstract "rational" form versus an inferiorized "practical," experiential and embodied form, usually reflecting the different status of the different groups possessing it. The split opens the way for the dominance of abstract "rational management" over those reduced to serviceable bodies that carry out the tasks management plans and dictates, and also allows appropriation of agency on behalf of those counted as rational managers. The dominant party can afford to "forget" the other, provided they continue to function in serviceable ways or are replaceable or substitutable, and if their level of denial goes deep enough, may be inclined to do so even where the other is not replaceable.

Contemporary hegemonic constructions of agency are the other side of, and are encouraged by, hyperbolized conceptions of autonomy "conjoined with individualistic conceptions of subjectivity and agency."²² The self-made achiever is an hyper-separated and

²¹See Frederique Apffel Marglin and Stephen Marglin, *Dominating Knowledges: Development, Culture and Resistance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

²²Lorraine Code, "The Perversion of Autonomy and the Subjection of Women," in Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, eds., *Relational*

hyperbolized autonomous self whose illusion of self-containment is built on denying or backgrounding the contributions of subordinated others and re-presenting the joint product in terms of a hyperbolized individualistic agency whose just deserts are then awarded to “the achiever.” In a similar way, global economic systems of property formation are formed in terms of the rationality of the master subject, as such an autonomous, separative self. They erase the agency of both social others and of nature, both as land and as pre-existing, enabling annexation of ecological systems and their products, just as they erase or downgrade the agency involved in “women’s work.”²³ The increasing gulf in global capitalism between consumption and production and the growing remoteness and irresponsibility of chains of production and distribution institutionalize hegemonic representations of agency in global property formation systems. We can see the same mechanism as that employed by Aristotle at work in current moves to place patented natural organisms under the aegis of intellectual property rights as the creations of reason (assumed to be the identifying property of the center) in which the contributions of other nonhuman systems and agencies are as completely disappeared as those of the mother in Aristotle’s schema. As far as recognizing the ecological embedment of the dominant culture in the larger system of nature is concerned, current social forms based on hegemonic agency in global capitalism are at about the same stage in their recognition of nature as Aristotelian philosophy was in its recognition of women’s role in its account of human reproduction.

When the other’s agency is treated as background or denied, we give the other less credit than is due. We easily come to take for granted what they provide for us, and to starve them of the resources they need to survive. This is of course the main point of hegemonic construals of agency and labor — they provide the basis for appropriation of the Other’s contribution by the One or center. The “profound forgetting” of nature which ensues from the hegemonic construction of agency, the failure to see otherized nature as a collaborative partner or to understand relations of dependency on it, is the basis of the now global economic system of self-maximizing economic rationality in which the maximum is extracted and not enough is left to sustain the life of the others on which the rational system is dependent. Hegemonic conceptions of human agency are fostered in the anthropocentric culture of mastery; these are linked to denials of dependency on social and

Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 184.

²³See Marilyn Waring, *Counting for Nothing* (Auckland: Allen and Unwin, 1988).

ecological others, which are in turn linked to the application of inappropriate strategies and forms of rationality that aim to maximize the share of the “isolated” self and neglect the need to promote mutual flourishing. Thus the corporate manager is able to assume the contribution of nature in the form of a continuing support base for production, accumulation and renewal, but to deny it in failing to recognize and allow for nature’s reproduction and continuation.

Hegemonic constructions of agency that justify appropriation are especially encouraged in the culture/nature dualism typical of Western thinking because its systems of appropriation are based on the idea of applying labor to “pure” nature, as in Locke’s argument.²⁴ The process opens the way for enrichment, but its other side is that the blinkered vision involved is a problem for prudence as well as for justice in the case where the One is in fact dependent on this Other, for the One can gain an illusory and over-comfortable sense of their own ontological independence and ecological autonomy. It is just such a sense that seems to pervade the dominant culture’s contemporary disastrous misperceptions of its economic and ecological relationships. Countering this denial requires recognition, but “recognition” here must mean much more than just “remember” (as in the case of Mother’s Day) — recognition means, at least, incorporating that knowledge of their agency into economic institutions and distribution of social resources.

As the “forgetting” and backgrounding of nature is perhaps the most hazardous and distorting effect of Othering from a human prudential point of view, so the reconception of nature in agentic terms as a co-actor and co-participant in the world and its recognition in distributive terms is perhaps the most important aspect of moving to an alternative ethical framework. Such a reconceived nature would be no mere resource or periphery to our center, but another and prior center of power and need, whose satisfaction can and must impose limits on our own conception of ourselves, and on our own actions and needs. The nature we would recognize in a non-reductive model is not a mere human absence or conceptually dependent “Other,” not a mere precondition for our own star-stuff of achievement, but can be seen as an active collaborative presence capable of agency and other mindlike qualities. Nature as biospheric other is not a background part of our field of action or subjectivity, not a mere precondition for human action, not a refractory foil to self. Rather biospheric others can be other positive presences and ethical subjects to which we can owe a debt

²⁴For details see Plumwood, 1998, *op. cit.*

of gratitude, generosity and recognition as prior and enabling presences or ancestors.

3. Naturalizing and Denaturalizing Strategies

To the extent that in dominant forms of culture (Western or “modern” culture) nature is treated in terms of this kind of colonizing or Otherizing pattern, its agency, necessity and contribution, its “labor,” tend to be under-recognized just as women’s traditional tasks in household labor and childraising are under-recognized or treated as inessential, as the background services that make “real” work and achievement possible, rather than as achievement or as work themselves. Nature, perceived like woman as an adjunct to the male self rather than as a genuine other, can be represented as inessential and massively denied as the unconsidered background to technological society. Since anthropocentric culture sees non-human nature as a basically inessential constituent of the universe, nature’s needs can be systematically omitted from its systems of decision-making. Dependency on nature is denied, systematically, so that nature’s order, resistance and survival requirements are not perceived as imposing a limit on human goals or enterprises. For example, crucial biospheric and other services provided by nature and the limits they might impose on human projects are not considered in accounting or decision-making.²⁵ We pay attention to them only after disaster has occurred, and then only to “fix things up.” Where we cannot quite forget how dependent on nature we really are, dependency appears as a source of anxiety and threat, or as a further technological problem to be overcome.

How to attribute credit for mixed forms of labor is always a complex matter—think of the problems that can arise in recognizing the contributions of others to an academic paper, for example. But when the hegemonic patterns of backgrounding and denial of agency I have outlined are operative, recognizing contributions and apportioning credit between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, can be especially complex and involve multiple and cross-cutting denials that overemphasize or underemphasize the various elements. The sort of pattern of domination of nature I have outlined has a major bearing on how far and where agency and labor is recognized, as well as on how the structures of denial of agency—human and nonhuman—work and what they are designed to achieve. Generally the agency of nature is under-recognized, but there is an important class of cases that seem to present

²⁵See Waring, *op. cit.*

exceptions to this rule. I have argued that in anthropocentric culture, attributions tend to overemphasize the human (especially the privileged human) and underemphasize or deny the agency of nature. But they may also underemphasize or hide the social and overemphasize the natural, for example in the interests of making outcomes appear less open to change than they really are, or from some other motive. This opposing dynamic may derive from the anti-liberatory roles of the nature concept, or it may represent the prioritization in particular contexts of some other form of domination — human domination — over the domination of nature.

Numerous examples spring to mind of hegemonic constructions of agency involving nature. Intelligence and other human characteristics that have a substantial relationship to nurture, are written down by conservative social forces as hereditary, as “nature,” in order to give the inequalities in society they are associated with an air of inevitability. As Vandana Shiva points out, corporations involved in genetic engineering patent as “nature” seed varieties that represent the labor of hundreds of generations of indigenous farmers.²⁶ Certain kinds of environmentalist foci on eco-catastrophe as a phenomenon of nature preclude any adequate examination of its social aspects and causes.²⁷ Another important class of examples concerns the way landscapes are seen as “nature” in contrast to “culture.” Thus Kate Soper points to the failure to recognize the labor of otherized human groups (the laboring people) and the human social relations that have gone into places now presented as “nature,” for example the countryside of England. In Australia, the colonizers denied the possibility that the indigenous inhabitants, who were seen as semi-animal, could have ecological agency, and landscapes that often had substantial indigenous inputs and management were taken to be in “the pure state of nature,” including no element of indigenous human labor in their formation. The Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina now winds its way through surrounding land that is increasingly suburbanized, but planning codes require that buildings be carefully hidden from the sight of vehicles on the Parkway so that the illusion that the Parkway travels through “wilderness” can be maintained for the benefit of the tourist industry. Cosmetic strips of unlogged forest along highways in logging areas are often used to hide

²⁶See Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 1993).

²⁷For a critique of this hyper-separation, see Giovanna DiChiro, “Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice,” in Michael Goldman, ed., *Privatizing Nature: Political Struggles for the Global Commons* (London: Pluto, 1998).

destructive logging activities, and as in the case of the Blue Ridge Parkway, give the impression that there is much more “nature” around than there actually is, so that destruction of the remainder can continue without objection or hindrance.

In the case of deceptive naturalness, describing something as “nature” tends to be not so much a way to overacknowledge the contributions and workings of nature as a way to underacknowledge the human activities and social relations involved, and the extent of prior ownership or human construction. In these contexts we may need to “denaturalize,” to *demote* or supplement the emphasis on nature and note the presence of human influences which have been hidden, although this hiding will rarely involve a complete denial of the influence of nature. Although these cases seem to be an exception to our general claim that in dominant anthropocentric culture nature’s influence has been denied in favor of overcrediting the human, in fact they involve a more complex, multiple set of denials registering multiple forms of oppression and colonization. We need a complex, case-sensitive response to these complex denials, involving both naturalizing and denaturalizing strategies in combination.

We can sum up some of the complex classes of cases and strategies required as follows:

Type 1: Naturalizing 1: (deceptive naturalness 1). Counting something as “nature” in the sense of “pure nature” when it in fact has a human contribution (not merely a human influence) hides or denies the human social relations that have gone into that construction, often in the interests of making it seem unchangeable, of appropriating it, or for some other deceptive purpose such as suggesting there is more of it than there is. Examples: gender oppression (“woman’s nature”), the Blue Ridge Parkway, “terra nullius.” We need strategies of denaturalizing, that is, recognizing human agency as well as that of the nonhuman sphere, in response.

Type 2: Over-Humanizing: (deceptive humanness). Counting something (e.g., a place) as purely human when it involves the labor of nature jointly with human labor can hide or deny the ecological dependency relations in that construction. This is the dominant position, because as we have seen, nature’s operations and contributions to our joint human-nature undertakings are overwhelmingly denied or backgrounded in Western culture. We need strategies of “naturalizing” in the sense of recognizing nature’s agency, for example as in

acknowledging and providing for the continuation of “ecosystem services.”²⁸

Type 3: Naturalizing 2: (deceptive naturalness 2). Given the structure of type 2, one common way to hide certain human social relations and contributions (e.g., to a place) is to count the human groups involved themselves as nature. Then their contributions will not need to be credited or noticed. So in this case, too, we need to respond by “denaturalizing,” in the sense of distinguishing the human groups concerned themselves from nature and showing how their role has not been credited. But *at the same time* we need to naturalize, to credit the nonhuman agency that has not been credited.

Some groups historically identified with the body and the animal, such as indigenous people, women and those who do manual labor are especially likely to have the outcome of their labor represented as “nature” rather than as mutual construction between humans and nature. Such a hegemonic construction of agency based on associating these groups with “nature” seems to be what lies behind the case of patenting seeds, the case of indigenous people in Australia, and the case of the agricultural workers whose bodily labors over generations helped form the countryside now seen as “nature.” The basic motivations for such denials of their contribution is clear — it opens the way ethically for appropriation by the more powerful or prestigious of what the Others have helped create. Thus Australia was seen as “terra nullius,” the land of no one, open to appropriation because indigenous people were counted as semi-animal “nomads,” and their ecological agency in and attachment to the land were discounted.

It is important to note that this strategy relies on discounting the agency of the nonhuman sphere, that is, nature itself. It has been possible to discount the agency of subordinated groups of humans by counting them or their agency as nature only because nature’s agency is itself normally denied and backgrounded in Western culture. Now Soper problematizes cases of type 1, but not any of the remainder, and gives us an inadequate sense of our embeddedness in nature by failing to problematize cases of type 2 and 3. Cases of type 3 make up an important class of cases where the agency of certain groups of humans in the land is hidden, but we cannot understand type 2 cases without understanding type 3 cases. We can be grateful to Soper for clarifying

²⁸The concept of “ecosystem services” can be dangerously human-centered if it fails to recognize that such services have a much wider range of beneficiaries than the human and if it supports instrumentalizing and servant-like conceptions of the nonhuman sphere.

cases of type 1. But we still need to take account of the other two types, and this means understanding and countering the dominant tradition's denial of recognition to nature and nature's agency. A countering of cases of deceptive naturalness needs to be balanced by countering cases of deceptive humanness.

4. Dispensing with Nature?

One of the problems with such a partial account as Soper's which focusses only on cases of deceptive naturalness of type 1 unbalanced by cases of deceptive humanness of type 2 is that a common response to demoting or supplementing nature's agency in cases of deceptive naturalness is to suggest that maybe nature is something illusory we can dispense with or dismiss, that nature is not really other at all but is entirely constructed by us. Generalizing from particular cases of deceptive naturalness to cast generalized doubt on nature and nature's agency is a major basis for nature skepticism and constructivism applied to nature. But now, of all times, when we press so many natural limits and most need to be aware of what we are destroying in the nonhuman sphere and how dangerous this is for us, skepticism and constructivism of this generalized variety is immensely problematic; since we cannot come to terms with another we do not recognize as presenting to us any independent form of agency or limit on our actions. Once it is realized that cases of type 1 are only part of the story, the sorts of skepticism and constructivism that would dismiss concepts of nature and nature's agency in a completely general way are no longer so attractive. A more constructive response to these complex recognitions and emphases might be to develop a larger politics of place which could recognize as inscribed in place both human and nonhuman agencies — including the "labor" of earth processes, together with the constraints imposed by ecological relationships.

There are other, rather better, reasons for such generalized skepticism about nature. Many objections to the concept of nature assume conceptions of nature and culture drawn from anthropocentric dualisms that treat humanity and its cultural products as emphatically distanced from a nature defined in hyperseparated terms as "pure" and undefiled by human interference. Such polarities obscure or problematize the interactions and meeting points between nature and culture. In the hyperseparated picture, it appears that only "pure nature" is nature, and that nature must be a realm of pure otherness totally separate from the human. The nature skeptic then objects that it is impossible to find (especially nowadays) forms of the nonhuman that do not carry some human influence, and even that there is no such thing

as natural air in the sense of “air that has never been breathed by anyone else.” But if air is not nature (or natural), what is? The nature skeptic then concludes that there is no such thing as nature, since nothing can be guaranteed to be without human influence.

This kind of argument has many flaws. We do not have to abandon the claim to be another, separate person, just because someone else influences us or has some impact on us. So why should we have to abandon the claim that there is an other which is nature just because it often carries some human influence? To be other is not necessarily to be purely other. Something does not cease to be or to involve nature just because it has elements of the human, shows some human influence, or is interpreted by humans through human culture.²⁹ We have to remember that these dualistic, polarizing senses of nature that are heavily implicated in the current wave of nature skepticism are not the only possible or only current senses. Nevertheless, since the term “nature” is readily subject to this type of ambiguity, we should, where there is a risk of miscommunication, look towards a range of other expressions that are not so easily open to the assumption of purity as the term “nature.” For example, we might speak of “the earth,” or of ecological or biospheric systems or processes, although this can require from us a degree of specificity we may not always or easily be able to supply.

In arriving at a just assessment for crediting mixed forms of agency, we have to decide what sorts of influences to emphasize over what other and how much, and this can be a judicious and difficult matter, always presenting some element of the political in reflecting whose stories are told, whose efforts remembered and valued. We have to consider, too, a range of cases, not just those we have experienced ourselves and can see near where we happen to live. The earth is a big and still very diverse place. Many ideas of “nature,” especially in a place like Britain, seem primarily to aim to draw a contrast with urban or domestic existence, nature as the countryside, an area whose long history of human influence gives talk of “constructing nature” greater credibility than it would be likely to have on some remote Patagonian glacier. We must take into account those cases where human influences are very slight, and accounts which do not consider this may be unsuitable for many non-European contexts. Philosophical concepts and terminology need to be sensitive to our present problems and context, and in this context it seems misleading at best to talk about humans “constructing nature” in any general way. To talk of “construction” is

²⁹See Plumwood 1998, *op. cit.*.

in many contexts to imply that what is often mere influence or impact is actually control, to suggest that because we humans have an (often blind) impact or effect on the biosphere we can produce the outcomes we want. It is also to suggest that we can *reconstruct* it, when we cannot even reconstruct a bird's feather. Both these terms can involve serious overestimations of human contributions in a range of cases, and invite slippery slides into implications of control that are very dangerous in the present circumstances.

An alternative image sometimes proposed to supplant that of construction as a metaphor for human interaction with and influence on nature is the closely related metaphor of production, warranted according to some because "nature bears the indelible trace of [human] labor."³⁰ Human construction of "nature" was seen to imply skepticism because, on the hyper-separated concept; to be nature was to be completely independent of the human, so that what is not fully other cannot be nature. On the surface, productivism does not appear to imply skepticism, since rather than insisting that nature does not exist, productivists talk happily about our producing nature. Nevertheless productivism will produce the same skeptical outcome as constructivism unless the hyper-separated concept of nature is abandoned, since where nature is defined as completely other to the human, a nature produced by humans cannot really be nature. But once we abandon hyper-separation, we do not need anything as over-generalized, one-sided and monolithic in its recognition of agency as productivism — we can often make do with more pluralistic and context-sensitive concepts of influence, interaction and mutuality instead. These concepts connote some degree of independence, which has been felt to be problematic mainly because independence and otherness are mistakenly equated with hyperseparation. They are compatible with recognizing nature as a sphere of agency and co-agency that is distinct but not hyper-separate.

The concept of production has many drawbacks as a contender for the job of general model for human relations to nature and to the nonhuman sphere (if such a general model is indeed possible — perhaps all models should acknowledge their incompleteness and partiality): it continues the modern anthropocentric tradition of denying nature's agency, placing the human on the active side and the nonhuman on the passive, instead of allowing for the possibility of equal and mutual distribution of activity and passivity. It recognizes "labor" and agency in a hegemonic way as occurring on just one side, the human one, and

³⁰See Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

blocks any conceptualization of nature's labor in the production of what is sometimes described as "ecosystem services." Static, one-sided narratives of humans producing (managing?) nature do not envisage the possibility of mutual production, failing to allow for humans co-producing with an equally productive nature or to recognize that nature also produces us as well as we it. They continue to suggest human control, to at least the same degree as the concept of construction, and seem especially inappropriate for those many cases where the outcome is neither planned nor anticipated by those responsible for it.

The productivist's hyperbolized concept that humans produce alternative natures could be restated in more modest and less misleading terms as the idea that our actions can contribute (often unwittingly) to bringing about alternative forms or states of nature. Concepts of influence on and interaction with nature connote some degree of independence, which the productivist as well as the constructivist feels to be problematic, mainly, I think, because the difference between separation and hyperseparation, and therefore between independence and "pure otherness" has not been clearly registered. According to Neil Smith, it is a further virtue of the production model that it is a positive concept, but a closer focus reveals that this positivity is at least in some cases illusory, since the "positive activity" of humans involved in "producing," say, a desert, may in fact be that of destroying life and complexity.³¹ As a general model for human relations to nature, the production metaphor vastly overstates human causal contributions in an important range of cases. The productivist's answer to the question: how exactly *did* we produce that mountain range?, is unclear but seems likely to reduce to some form of use/mention confusion (humans created the concept) or to little more than some version of the influence thesis.

Finally, productivist emphasis on labor as the central feature of the human is not culture-neutral, but is especially associated with industrial modernity, Western culture and its insistence on human labor rather than the agency of nature as the source of wealth and life. If Western

³¹Here as in many other places the concept of negative and positive concepts and properties is highly problematic. See Val Plumwood, "Feminism and the Logic of Alterity," forthcoming in Marjorie Hass and Rachel Falmagne, eds., *Feminist Approaches to Logic* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001). Foucault's use of production as the leading metaphor for the action of power suffers from many of the general difficulties of production, as well as depending, like the concept explicated by Smith, on the problematic positive/negative property distinction I discuss in this article.

culture has made human labor and humanizing transformation of the land the source of human ownership, there are other cultures for whom it is place-based identity and narrative together with the naming of the land that creates title, in the sense of the right to live on the land and gain livelihood from it.³² The metaphor of production, with its insistence on the centrality of human labor, intensifies rather than reduces the problem of Eurocentrism and androcentrism in the concept of nature,³³ as well as the problem of anthropocentrism or subject/object thinking in left theory.³⁴ With its implications of control, it amplifies the problems of anthropocentric backgrounding and its consequences in neglect, indifference, “blind spots” and overconfidence.

Donna Haraway suggests that “nature” is now old hat, that we have moved past the time when the concept is useful.³⁵ This “post-naturism” seems to me to deserve the same retort as the similar advocacy of post-feminism; the fact that a few people have begun to contest the devaluing and agentic disappearance of nature or woman does not mean that we have arrived at a system of thought or life that can dispense with the concept. Just as we have a long way to go to reach postpatriarchy, we have a long way to go in recognizing and consciously maintaining the ecological relationships on which human culture depends. The concept and experience of nature is needed to make these relationships more apparent to people living increasingly urbanized lives in what they think of as “culture,” a sphere often but mistakenly seen as of exclusively human construction and agency.³⁶ Countering hyperseparation and false polarization between nature and culture through recognizing hybridity and continuity are important projects, but they do not imply reducing both binary terms (nature and

³²See Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (New York: North Point, 1990), p. 7.

³³Of course productivism in itself has been heavily criticized as associated with industrial models of society, with workerism, and with androcentrism. See Seyla Benhabib and Drusilla Cornell, eds., *Feminism as Critique* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).

³⁴For a recent critique of this aspect of Marx’s thought, see Teresa Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity: Grounds for a New Economy* (London: Routledge, 2000).

³⁵See Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium* (London: Routledge, 1997).

³⁶“Nature”/Wilderness can be captured by or made complicit with this delusion — especially when it is treated as a sphere apart — but it also has the potential to unsettle and counter it through the revelations of the radical dependency of human life wilderness journeying can bring.

culture) to a single term (culture) — an unsatisfactory formula for resolving dualistic constructions, especially where the victorious survivor is the traditionally dominant one in the problem narrative. A more complete shake-up of the dualistic boundaries would involve working out new terms for *both* the relata, both nature and culture.

As part of escaping dualist construction, we should reject certainly the idea that culture is self-enclosed and nature purely other (which seems often to be part of what people who talk about dissolving boundaries have in mind). But rejection of these polarizing constructions of nature does not require dispensing with nature, prioritizing culture over nature, or absorbing the one pole of nature into the other pole of culture. Such reductionist measures are not helpful reinventions of the concept of nature — rather they move with the mainstream of the Western tradition of anthropocentrism and backgrounding. They support rather than disrupt the modern sense, especially fostered in urban life, that we humans are completely immersed in a self-enclosed sphere of our own we can call “culture.”³⁷ Indeed the central problem can be taken to lie just as much in this concept of culture as in the concept of nature itself. The idea that human life takes place in a self-enclosed, completely humanized space that is somehow independent of an inessential sphere of nature which exists in a remote space “somewhere else” might be seen as the foundational delusion of the West.³⁸ A dangerous doctrine, strongly implicated in the environmental crisis, this framework of self-enclosure is the love-child of the old dominant narrative of human mastery and centrality mated with the much younger circumstance of human experience of commodification in the global city. We augment rather than disrupt this foundational delusion by adopting what amounts to an intensified form of nature denial.

5. Inclusive Accounts of Nature

None of this is to say that the concept of nature (or indeed of culture) is in order as it stands. To the extent that “nature” in the West has been defined in and through anthropocentric, androcentric and

³⁷The post-modern tendency to reduce nature to culture is encouraged by the assumption that non-human nature can be treated in just the same way as the human body (see for example Raia Prokhovnik, *Rational Woman: a Feminist Critique of Dichotomy* (London: Routledge, 2000), despite the fact that the human body is clearly much more closely integrated in human culture than is the nonhuman sphere.

³⁸On the role of hyperseparated concepts in the area of wilderness see Plumwood, 1998, *op. cit.*

Eurocentric narratives justifying the dominance of humanity and mastering reason over the nonhuman sphere, it is an important project to problematize the concept of nature as so defined. But there is no necessity for concepts of nature to be trapped inside these stories. Concepts of nature are like those of woman: they can be liberated through imagining and implementing new narratives. To the extent that they have been forged in a dualistic structure of contrast to the human and to reason, we must constantly problematize their old meanings and criticize their old stories. But neither for women nor for nature is it helpful to demand abandonment, as opposed to reworking, reinventing, and reimagining, and to neglect the option of making new stories.

Against those who see the role of nature in these guiding narratives as a reason for totally rejecting any nature concept, I would argue that abandoning concepts of nature at this point for this reason could leave the dominant narratives unresolved but still influential in their background status, while the failures of knowledge and rationality they inspire become increasingly critical. Further down the track, I hope, we will no longer place such weight on the concept of nature as a catch-all concept defined in contrast to the human, favoring more multiple and less homogenizing contrasts and alliances. But a society inured to mastery and pressing its ecological limits desperately needs ways to acknowledge elements and limits of otherness in the sphere of the nonhuman, since final conquest of that otherness is incompatible with ecological survival. Such a society therefore requires some concept of nature, whatever the language they may use to express it.

So we can't just strike out with a brand new story with brand new characters, or no story at all, and hope to make sense of where we are. For better or worse, the old story holds the keys to who we are, why we are here, where we have come from, and where we might now go. Reflecting, in a culturally self-critical vein, on the master narratives of humanity, culture, reason and nature in the West³⁹ can give us valuable clues as to why the dominant forms of "developed" society, and the relationships with nature they have built on a form of denial, are now failing the most basic tests of rationality and fitness for survival. Reflecting on that failure can suggest some guidelines for devising counterstories that might disrupt the old ideals and projects of mastery (although I am not suggesting that all our narratives and traditions need to be abandoned).

³⁹An important group of these narratives is discussed in Merchant, 1996, *op. cit.*

For example, it seems that much more is required to disrupt the old narratives than celebrating and fostering the breakdown or blurring of boundaries between nature and culture, the main strategy for rethinking suggested in the work of post-modern thinkers such as Donna Haraway.⁴⁰ A generalized strategy of boundary breakdown is a shallow and imprecise strategy for resolving dualistic constructions, since boundary breakdown is an ambiguous feature that can occur in oppressive as well as liberatory ways. Although reclaiming the denied elements of continuity and overlap between nature and culture is crucial to resolving dualized construction and hyperseparation, certain kinds of boundary breakdown imply lack of respect, and are implicated in projects of colonizing and erasing the other. A colonizing consciousness aims to form hegemonic wholes that involve the dissolution of the boundaries and integrity of the colonized other, resulting in projects of assimilation and cultural destruction. Placing a destructive mining or energy venture in a great wilderness area may help break down the boundary between nature and culture, but is not a cause for celebration or a useful disruption of a damaging tradition. If some kinds of boundary breakdowns are *with power*, and only certain kinds are against power, understanding the difference requires a theory of oppression that will take us well beyond the fashionable preoccupation with breaking boundaries.

There are several important theoretical challenges, so far not much explored, in countering the West's foundational "blind spot," the delusion of culture as a self-enclosed space hyper-separate from an inessential nature. One of these is to give an inclusive rather than an exclusive account of the human/nature relation, for if nature is the sphere of the non-human, the further fact of the inclusion of humanity in nature means that this "not" must be read in an inclusive rather than exclusive way. That is, nature as ecological process should be seen as a larger sphere which takes in but greatly exceeds the human — it is the

⁴⁰The overemphasis on this strategy seems to arise from the familiar conflation of separation and hyperseparation. Although Haraway in some places clearly recognizes nature as an active, independent agency (e.g., Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism as a Site of Discourse on the Privilege of Partial Perspective," in *Feminist Studies*, 14, 3, 1998), this sensibility is less in evidence in later work such as Haraway, 1997, *op. cit.* Her concept of nature as "a body-in-the-making" seems ambiguous between the idea of nature as a "vacant lot" or as a "development proposition/potential" — a neutral field passively open to the inscriptions of culture" — and the determinable concept I outline below.

“more-than-human,”⁴¹ in contrast to the centric and oppositional account of it as alien or lesser. One source of the view of nature as alien and lesser is the dualistic partner concept of the human I have discussed elsewhere under the heading of the Differential Imperative.⁴² This type of account emphasizes as authentically human, and as the human ideal, those features that supposedly make humans different from the animal and from the larger natural world, rather than what is shared with them. Such an exclusionary understanding of the human contributes in a major way to the sense of humans and human culture as “outside nature.” The challenge to dualistic accounts of nature involves rethinking both sides of the oppositional human/nature contrast.

An associated task is to give a thorough account, not only at the ecological but also at the conceptual level, of how culture might be included or embedded in nature (as ecological process), and of why this very basic fact about the world is now seemingly invisible to so many of us. In at least one important sense of nature, the relationship of nature to culture involves a determinable/determinate type of logical relationship. For example, we seem to locate hunger and food in nature, and locate spaghetti sauce and the desire for it in culture, where spaghetti sauce is a determinate of the determinable concept of food. The determinate, food, is of the realm of necessity, but the determinable is contingent, the demand for it a matter of individual and cultural choice. We and all other animals need to eat food as a matter of (our) biological nature, of necessity, but the choice of what we eat is part of the realm in which we (and all other animals) exercise freedom and create culture.

If this is so, the embedment of culture in nature turns in part on logical differences in kinds of narratives linked through different levels of generality and specificity. We can vindicate here a concept of nature as a participant in or contributor to all we do in culture, in the use and exchange of nature in the city as well as in our dependency on ecological services.⁴³ Thus the foundational delusion of human self-enclosure can be seen to involve not just an ecological but also a logical level of failure. Perhaps more importantly for the crucial questions of social change, the neglect of the embedment of lived experience, in this higher-order level of physical generality in

⁴¹In David Abram’s terms. See David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon, 1996).

⁴²See Plumwood, 1993, *op. cit.*

⁴³See Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

contemporary life, also involves failures at the level of social organization. Filling out at this level an account of embedment in nature and its invisibility and neglect in contemporary culture would require reference to contingent factors such as the increasing irresponsibility and remoteness of chains of production and consumption in global markets and the forms of culture and urban/rural experience they select and support.⁴⁴

But this foundational delusion of cultural self-enclosure is also the delusion of the “autonomous” center shaping hegemonic concepts of agency and achievement, and concepts of culture and of nature are complicit in it to the extent that they fall in with the dominant anthropocentric meanings the centric narrative gives them. One of these centric meanings is to think of nature always in the negative, as an absence of the human or the qualities of the human, of the center. Here the dominant meaning of nature as the non-human sphere would seem to be deeply problematic. To counter the foundational delusion, we need to think of nature as a positive presence, or as a community (positive presence) of positive presences, and not as a failure to be or to involve the human.

Does this mean that the very use of the negative term “nature” as meaning “the nonhuman” is inevitably anthropocentric? I think it is a little more complex than that. There is a serious problem about how to fix in any absolute way the idea of a negative term in view of widely accepted transformation principles such as double negation. As I argue in a forthcoming work, the use of a term explicitly employing or defined by negation, whether “nonhuman” or “other-than-the-human,” is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for centric and oppressive uses, or for concluding that “nonhuman” cannot designate a positive presence. Rather it is whether that term is used to conform to a centric pattern that brings all meanings back to a privileged and exclusionary center — of meaning, experience or value. “Nonhuman” may in some contexts be used in this way, but in other contexts it may not. There is no immediate, general or context-free way to decide whether a term like “nonhuman” is used in centric ways or not, short of determining its pattern of use in a particular context. But if “nonhuman” is neither automatically hyperseparated nor automatically anthropocentric, we can at least say in what pattern of attributions it would be anthropocentric:

⁴⁴The concept of remoteness is discussed in Val Plumwood, “Ecojustice, Inequality and Ecological Rationality,” in John Dryzek and David Schlosberg, eds., *Debating the Earth: The Environmental Politics Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). See also Price, *ibid.*

when matters are constantly brought back to questions of otherness, sameness or difference from the human as center. To define nature as a lack of human qualities is not only to deny continuity and overlap, but to define it both as inferior and always in relation to the human as center.

As part of breaking up the centrally polarized configuration of the human/nature contrast, we need some demassifying of the concept of nature, which as part of this opposition tries to cover the whole non-human sphere in an homogeneous way. I see as a clear symptom of human-centeredness the obsessive focus on the kind of configuration of “nature” that gives a homogenized contrast with the human such a central cultural role. Where our frameworks of thought are no longer human-centered, we should be able to break up this dualized configuration of the human/nature contrast, to establish a more fully interspecies ethic that draws contrasts in many different and diverse places and ways. When we are in a position to decline the discourse of human-centeredness and instrumentalism, we will be in a position to cease the excessive focus on this major simplifying and homogenizing contrast of human versus nature, and also to reconfigure the field in terms of a more complex and varied set of interspecies distinctions and alliances to create a more complex and less centric configuration of the world. But contra Haraway, I would say that while we still have mainly to counter and encounter the dominant story in which the world is always referred back to a human center and is configured mainly as a human resource, we are obliged to continue some of the major *counter focus* on the other side of this contrast, as nature, at least in an important range of contexts. This is so because, where human-centeredness and oppositional practice is still at work, some forms of counter-affirmation of the devalued elements configured as nature are required (although these should not take the form of reverse centrism or polar reversal) that make the objective of immediately and finally breaking up all contrasting configuration unrealistic and unwise.

One ultimate aim of reworking nature concepts should be an interspecies politics and ethics which ventures beyond the polarized configurations that classify the world into contrasting sides of human and other, or alternatively in terms of human and similar (its hegemonic variant in the currently popular moral extensionism of contemporary philosophy which so neatly confirms philosophers’ intuitions of human superiority). Brian Luke⁴⁵ has provided some interesting

⁴⁵Brian Luke, “Solidarity Across Diversity: A Pluralistic Rapprochement of Environmentalism and Animal Liberation,” *Social Theory and Practice*, 21,

examples of ethical configurations which avoid the old human-centered species hierarchies and oppositions built on the species generalities of the “great-chain-of being,” a set of human-centered ethical configurations assuming a descending order of species,⁴⁶ usually based on degree of similarity to the human in some selected area, and the attempt to resolve interspecies conflict by focusing on a few general qualificatory properties of species that are supposed to pick out ethical winners and losers. This sort of moral extensionism is hegemonic, bringing all valuations back to similarity to or difference from the human as the norm or center, and it is also vastly over-simplifying. Without its pervasive modeling of ethical relations in species terms of human and other, we can aim at a form of ethical consideration which is more contextual and can recognize unassimilated otherness. Once these dualized configurations have been broken down, as they can be in many contexts, questions of species “differences” (in the sense of being other-to-the human) and hierarchies of similarity to the human (e.g., consciousness) need not loom so large in the formulation and application of ethical principles.

The interspecies politics it can make possible could make alliances across species that de-emphasize the importance of generalized and stereotypical species frameworks and differentials and open the door to new kinds of communicative experience — new, that is, for Western culture — which might just begin to frame the world in more sensitive and nuanced terms than we can imagine while wearing the simplifying blinkers of human superiority. These reframings prepare the ground for movement from monological and dualistic types of relationship with nature towards the kinds of structures of relationship we need to develop to begin addressing the environmental crisis at the level of culture. They can open the way for a culture of nature that allows for much more in the way of contextual and negotiated relationships of communication, balanced dialogue, and mutual adjustment between species, starting with our own, in what would be, in the old terms, a liberatory blending or meeting of nature and culture.

2, 1995; also in Roger S. Gottlieb, ed., *The Ecological Community* (London: Routledge, 1997).

⁴⁶These configurations neglect context and display what Luke calls “generalism.”