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Abstract

‘Nature’ is not just a word that accompanies humans in their quotidian lives, but also a fluid and contested concept that entails various implications for gender and class politics. In times of drastic social changes where the momentum for dealing with climate change and environmental as well as social inequalities increases, analysing the roots and consequences of concepts such as nature, as well as eco-nostalgic tendencies, is especially important. By taking Carolyn Merchant’s idea of the death of nature as a starting point, and reflecting upon further readings such as Octavia Butler’s novel *Dawn*, this essay discusses the different implications of ‘getting back to nature’ for gender politics and sustainability discourses. It argues that this idea presupposes an inherently flawed juxtaposition of nature and culture. This dichotomy results in the creation of multiple inequalities and conflicting ideologies, such as through the common conceptualisation of certain parts of nature as an ideal representation for human sexuality. The thought of getting back to nature also raises questions of human positionality as a species in this discourse. It offers two opportunities: to either continue living according to a problematic status quo, or entirely change the way humans perceive their position in the world. While the romantic image of wilderness leaves no space for humans to make a sustainable living on the planet and only the former or collective suicide appear to be possible solutions, postapocalyptic approaches show a desire to (re)discover the place of humanity in the ecosystem. Consequently, this essay concludes that instead of supporting the maintaining of existing gender norms, one should attempt to reframe narratives surrounding a glorified view of nature, certain perspectives of humans, and the hope to reach an organic ideal, to develop new and more inclusive ideas of gender and natural resources in the present, for example through fostering energy intimacy.

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Introduction

Learning about the wish of getting back to nature for the first time, it appeared to me as if it were fuelled by the common romanticised way of thinking that most aspects of life were better at a previous point in time. After all, it seems easier to imagine a more equal and cooperative past that was lost, than recognizing and actively challenging the faults of the present. However, after a more thorough analysis, Carolyn Merchant's (1990) arguments and eco-nostalgic ideas present intricacies and origins that reflect multiple societal perspectives and changes over time. In the following, I argue that the thought of getting back to nature is a multifaceted idea that is deeply flawed but simultaneously opens up the discussion about human nature – and how we conceptualise humans and nature – which can support possibilities to either continue the problematic status quo or change the way that humans perceive their position in the world. I consider Merchant's (1990) understanding as a starting point, then discuss multiple complications of the different ideas of nature, such as its consideration as a fixed and separate entity from humans, and will further examine how these discourses inform different narratives of the future.

The Death of Nature

When Merchant (1990) writes about having lost an organic world, she refers to a way of living in or seeing the world, rather than a physical state of 'nature'. In pre-modern times, Merchant (1990) argues, humans lived in direct relations with their environment. Daily interactions with nature were characterised by close and cooperative community networks that aimed to provide sustenance for the group. The idea prevailed that the self, society, and the cosmos were interdependent entities that created a functioning organism. Merchant (1990) goes on to describe how, with the rise of science, industrialisation, and the growing need for energy sources, humans started to instead view nature as a machine devoid of emotional life or value and that is passively waiting to be exploited. Thus, when she (1990) mentions the organic world we have lost, she describes the death of nature as a living being. To explain how this shift from an organismic to a mechanistic worldview happened, she (1990) uses two different perspectives of nature as a starting point. In the premodern period, nature was commonly personified as female and contrasted to artificially created things. On the one hand, it was therefore viewed as a kind and nurturing mother. On the other hand, it was considered a destructive force that could

render violence. Merchant (1990) points out that the second image raised the idea of the importance to dominate the physical environment. However, depending on how the first image was used, it could create a similar narrative. The pastoral tradition, for example, conceptualized nature as a benevolent but passive and subordinate female. This raised the thought that, when cultivated and manipulated, nature, hence women, could be used as a commodity. Nonetheless, she (1990) goes back to emphasizing the restraining force of the concept of nature as a nurturing mother and a living organism, as it supported advocates fighting against the rape-like exploitation of the earth's resources through activities such as mining.

Merchant's (1990) analysis offers significant insights into different understandings of human and environmental relationships, but also leaves room for critique. She (1990, p.xvii) states that her aim is not "to reinstate nature as the mother of humankind nor to advocate that women reassume the role of nurturer." Yet she (1990) holds a nostalgic wish to go back to some form of the organismic worldview, without recognizing that it is just as socially constructed as the images of nature that enabled humans to shift to a mechanistic view in the first place. However, I consider other two aspects from Merchant's (1990) text to be important, first, that women have traditionally been associated with nature, and second, that this creates a two-way feedback system. The image of nature informs the ideas of gender relationships, while the ideas of gender and sexuality are projected onto the systems of the world. The concept of 'nature' is therefore fluid and depending on how and by whom it is conceptualized and used, it has different impacts on social and environmental relationships. Consequently, if nature is not just one specific thing, the wish to go back to it is inherently problematic, if not strictly impossible to be fulfilled, and will easily evoke conflicting ideas.

Dichotomies and Resulting Violence

An example of such a conflicting ideology is the commonly held view of nature as an ideal representation for human sexuality. Mortimer Sandiland and Erickson's (2010) chapter about queer ecologies perfectly demonstrates how socially constructed views of nature can be shifted to create norms that fit a society's hierarchical agendas. In the 20th century, notions of nature started to inform discourses of sexuality that were strongly guided by ideas of evolution, transferring a limited view of what animal, thus 'natural', reproduction is supposed to look like, to human reproduction. Although referring to the animal kingdom, Darwin's theory of sexual selection supposed that each sex obeys universal principles, the passionate male, and the coy

female (Roughgarden, 2004). These principles combined became norms of societal relations and rendered homosexuality as ‘unnatural’ because it presupposed non-reproductive sex, which was considered to go against evolution and the preservation of the species. Furthermore, an idea evolved that homosexuality was mostly represented in urban centres, which worked to contrast cities that were contaminated sites where seemingly artificial and unhealthy deviancies from the norm were found, with peaceful, clean and natural spaces of wilderness that offered an ideal escape from such terrors of modernity (Mortimer Sandiland & Erickson, 2010). To challenge these ideologies, Roughgarden (2004) presents an account of sexual diversity found in the natural world. She confirms that this diversity, which, for example, includes asexual species and species that change sex, is intentionally being ignored or denied in teachings of ecology to enable oppressive frameworks, as a close look at the animal kingdom would reverse prevailing gender binaries. Roughgarden (2004) also states that none of these variations are superior in ‘nature’, which shows that narratives surrounding animal heterosexuality and sexual selection only serve to maintain patriarchal structures.

Morton (2017) echoes the conclusion that nature is a fluid construct but goes on to complicate Merchant (1990) by identifying the underlying problem of Eurocentric worldviews as the fact that nature is conceptualized as inherently separate from humans. He (2017) points out that it is the creation of such a dichotomy that ultimately leads to problematic views of our relationships with each other and the world. As per Morton (2017), nature has never existed as separate, since no social space was ever fully human, while humans have simultaneously always affected their environment, even if previously on a smaller scale. Consequently, an attempt to return to nature always requires violence and oppression, and it is exactly the strict idea of nature that justifies this violence. This is because, trying to evoke a non-existent organic past, the ways in which things actually exist are violently being pushed to their limits. German fascism, with its aim to ‘purify’ a nation from a supposedly pathogenic community and unnatural ways of life, which lead to the brutal extermination of the Jews, is just one example of Morton’s (2017) rationale.

Human Positionality

Getting back to nature is hereby underlined to be a multi-layered imagination that leaves much room for the possibility to reinvent or further manifest oppressive norms. It also raises the question of ‘who’ would ‘go back to nature’. Cronon (1996) gives an excellent account of how

the environmental movement was born out of ideas of wilderness that were based on gendered romanticizations of the frontier. When Europeans arrived at the unknown landscape of North America, the frontier offered a possibility for them to reinvent themselves and their institutions, reinstate racial ideas and create a new national identity, which is now considered as being gradually lost. He (1996) explains that protecting wilderness can therefore also be thought of as protecting the nation's myth of origin, which mainly had heroic men at its forefront, who would usually be the most masculine when being in the wilderness at the frontier. Later, when feminizing tendencies of civilization started to threaten masculinity, many would seek out wilderness to connect to this past again. Hence, Cronon (1996) points out, it was usually the male elite who retreated to the outdoors, and when they did, they visited wilderness as a form of recreation – thus as consumers – rather than conceiving nature as a place where sustainable productive labour is being practiced, and has been practices since the beginnings of human existence. Therefore, the image of unworked wilderness as an ideal was born out of an imagination of those who have in fact never worked on the land, which only underlines the artificiality of this concept. Additionally, the frontier was usually, in contrast to the glorified image, a place of brutal conflict where people of different cultures fought for resources. In this wilderness narrative, however, it would be those same men who could redeem civilization, decide who is given a voice, and then rebuilt it on already existing or new gender and class norms.

Another significant suggestion Cronon (1996) makes is that the romantic image of wilderness as completely separate from humans leaves no space for humans to make a sustainable living from the land. If wilderness protection is being conceived as a direct conflict between the human and the non-human, it ignores conflicts among humans themselves and makes a falsely collective civilisation appear to be the root of all evil. As a result, Cronon (1996) argues, it is often concluded, as possibly intended by the founders of these narratives, that the only way we can protect wilderness, as wilderness excludes the possibility of any cultivation of the land and therefore survival of humans, is either collective suicide or returning to an equally idealised hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Origin myths that are rooted around pristine wilderness therefore appear especially prone to opening speculations about an apocalypse as the likely and possibly preferred outcome to current crises. Various sources make similar claims that humans might simply be incapable of living harmoniously within the natural world. It is important to acknowledge the way humans are referred to here. Especially in discourses of global warming, all-encompassing species terminology is increasingly being adopted when speaking about humanity, but multiple scholars, such as Di Chiro (2017), point out that why is problematic.

First, it neglects human diversity, and second, humans do not play an equal role in altering the environment, while the consequences of climate change are being experienced disproportionately. However, such global crises, and the arising thoughts of an apocalypse, raise thoughts of what led civilization to this point – and it is easy to fall into generalizations.

Insights From Postapocalyptic Narratives

When looking at eco-nostalgia and narratives of going back to nature, there seem to be traces of a desire to (re)discover the place of humanity (as a collective) in the ecosystem, and to possibly overturn the image of humans being inherently destructive towards themselves. In Butler's (2000) post-apocalyptic novel *Dawn*, a few humans have been rescued by the Oankali. They are an extra-terrestrial species that aims to merge its genes with the human genome in order to reproduce. What was striking to me, was that the main character Lilith is extremely stubborn to let go of her ideas of humanity, despite the fact that nearly all she previously knew had already been destroyed. She does not want to accept being genetically altered, although she learns that humans are fundamentally, biologically flawed due to the combination of their high intelligence and a hierarchical gene which induces them with the drive to self-destruct. According to Johns (2010), Butler has in fact been criticised for her biological essentialism, which depicts human's social behaviour as being largely defined by genetics, such as the hierarchical gene in *Dawn*. Johns (2010), however, adds that Butlers novel introduces another layer depicting a strong juxtaposition of human destructiveness and biophilia. Lilith, after all, demonstrates her will to live against the option to commit suicide, which in the Oankali view would have instead been a realization of the death drive that is supposedly innate to humans. What is intriguing here is that, even though the hierarchical gene in the story is a 'fact', it does, at least in the first novel, not withhold Lilith from hoping otherwise and acting in the contrary. This can add a significant perspective into analysing concepts of getting back to nature, as it reflects a strong wish for a new chance to live a better life; an opportunity to prove the essentialist idea wrong, which Lilith clearly displays. An apocalypse narrative enables humans to imagine exactly that. An apocalypse resembles an experiment in which the human species, seemingly pure, is put into an artificial surrounding mirroring that of untouched wilderness, where human nature will be fundamentally tested in the process of rebuilding society. The apocalypse, equivalent in concept to the idea of a pristine wilderness, offers an artificial opportunity for humans in what would resemble the state of nature, in which mankind supposedly lives before any social order or state-structure is put into place, to discover the

human essence, if such exists (Merchant, 1990). In this respect, the desire to go back to nature could also be interpreted as a way to discover more about human nature.

The idea of a completely new beginning offers hope for developing different, possibly more inclusive ideas of gender, politics, energy, and communal living. However, the apocalyptic discourses create apathy in people, especially those least affected by adverse climate impacts, to change something in the present. Furthermore, it presupposes the thought that only those who have the resources now, which are unequally distributed in the world, will survive and ultimately reconstruct the planet, which could threaten the hope for a new, better beginning. This reflects one of Cronon's (1996) fears too, namely that either narrative, whether that of going back to a romanticised image of the past, or imagining a new post-apocalyptic beginning ultimately distances us from the actual problems that people are currently experiencing on the ground. A vital question to ask is therefore, how should we start actively moving forward?

Reframing the Human/Nature Relationship

Cronon (1996) concludes that in order to reach the perfect middle ground and live in balance with nature, one needs to change the conceptualization of nature, which can be especially beneficial if we believe that current hierarchical and oppressive structures could stem from dividing our world into separate linear categories. In this regard, Western culture has much to learn from indigenous views, although these can and should certainly not be generalized either. It has become popular among resource managers and scientists to incorporate Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) into their projects or research. However, McGregor (2004) underscores that there are fundamental differences in the aboriginal view of TEK, and the non-aboriginal interpretation of the same principle. She (2004) states that this contradiction reflects the difference in cosmology. In most Eurocentric analyses, TEK is simply referred to as the knowledge indigenous people have about their natural environment. Nonetheless, for many indigenous people the environment automatically encompasses everything human and yields an incomparable intrinsic value. Furthermore, aboriginal views of TEK are action oriented. It is not just a source of knowledge but a way of being in a relationship with Creation. It focuses on proper ways to relate to all beings, human or non-human, which must be based on respect and leave behind any strictly limiting categorical definitions. McGregor (2004) therefore emphasizes that the most important aspect in their traditional knowledge is having active relationships.

One way in which this thinking could be put into practice is by relating these teachings to quotidian usages of energy sources, which, as Cariou (2017) confirms, should be based on intimacy. In traditional aboriginal energy-use practices, every community member has direct and personal relationships with their energy sources. One considers any resource as a gift that should hence never be wasted or exploited. Using energy sources thereby becomes a practice of receiving rather than extracting, while in most Eurocentric societies energy becomes commodified to an extent that it no longer holds any relationship with the user. Cronon (1996) agrees that the most effective way to gradually achieve such a fundamental change in perspective is by bringing it into practice at home and recognise these relationships on a daily basis. He (1996) describes how he realised that when reflecting on feeling most connected to the physical environment, he would always remember places close to his home, even if they could be considered rather unimpressive. This is his (1996) reminder that it is the experience and the daily relationship with the environment that make it special and important to him, not some characteristics of a separated natural space. Alaimo (2016) takes this into account as well. She (2016) introduces a new ethics of inhabiting, where instead of seeing one's own domestic space as separating and shielding oneself from the outside, or as being unimportant to daily relationships, one should embrace the connections made with the world on a constant basis and find pleasure, rather than repulsion, in daily relationships with non-humans. This would entail experiencing our bodies as permeable, multispecies habitats. To see humans as more animal and nature as more humanlike, as Alaimo (2016) phrases it, could consequently completely transform our relationships with each other, gender, race and class distinctions, as well as fundamentally change what can be considered as being 'human'.

Conclusion

To conclude, the idea of getting back to nature is inherently problematic, as each aspect of the concept of nature can be contested. This analysis argued that the world we have lost was not organic, as no such thing ever existed, but conceptualising nature in particular ways has various implications for current gender and class politics, while also informing future-oriented ideas of human relationships with the physical environment. At the core of this narrative is a question about how we see ourselves as humans – although the image of the species can be challenged – in a relationship with the world, and how, if that changes through adopting less strictly categorizing ways of thinking and living, we could possibly reach a more balanced and less

hierarchical relationship with humans and non-humans in the actual present, instead of in a fictional future or past.

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