

The Politics of the Natural in U.S. History and Popular Culture

Nature plays an important role both materially and ideologically in our culture. Environmental problems, particularly the contemporary concern over global climate change, are crucially important challenges, and we urgently need to be able to think clearly about them. But because "nature" and "natural" have such powerful and complex cultural resonances, the use of these concepts as tropes, metaphors, and dominant cultural narratives has the capacity to confuse and obscure our thinking about environmental policy. In particular, metaphors and narrative frameworks about nature in regard to "human nature"—for example, understandings of human evolution, inherent human capacities for violence and sex, and differences among humans—have often been used to naturalize and therefore justify social inequalities.

There is often quite a gap between how scientists or policy-makers approach questions of nature and environment, and dominant ways of thinking and talking about nature and environment found in popular culture. Nevertheless, the latter provides a framework within which the former is often accomplished. Habits of popular and commonsense thinking can be shaken up by a few simple questions: what are the effects (political, rhetorical, ideological) of calling something "natural"? Does the descriptive term *natural* assume or justify social behaviors and relationships that are actually built on inequity and exploitation? What are the consequences for the environment (the land, animals, water, ecosystems, the biosphere) of these inequitable social arrangements, and how does an

uncritical understanding of "nature" and the "natural" prevent us from seeing these connections?

One of the commonplace assumptions I want to challenge is that nature and culture, or the natural and the artificial (or "manmade"), are identifiably and completely separate, and should be so. This is one of the major problems with popular and mainstream environmentalist discourses. Challenging this separation goes against the grain for many of us because it troubles the obviousness or transparency of what we think of as "natural." But we only have to look at the daily news to see how often ideas of what is natural and what counts as nature are called into question or called into service to support various claims or positions. Moreover, the lines of separation between artificial and natural, whether or not they were ever clear, are now becoming more and more blurred. New genetic, agricultural, and reproductive technologies (such as cloning, stem cell research, in-vitro fertilization, and genetically modified foods) are serious material challenges to the idea that nature and culture are or should be separate. And assuming that these two realms are separate obscures human environmental responsibilities.

Why, when advanced scientific technologies make pinning down exactly what is meant by the term *natural* harder and harder, does the designation remain so powerful a tool in important contemporary social debates? Arguments from nature have long been used to try to justify social phenomena such as racial and cultural differences in educational outcomes, different gendered athletic, academic, or work abilities, or the rightness or wrongness of gay relationships. None of these arguments have proven to be conclusive, yet attempts to find biological explanations for social differences persist. This is not to say that there are no biological differences between various groups of people, but the effort to find such differences has been historically a suspect project.

All of these examples are about people or about "human nature." Things get even more slippery when we think about the ways in which changing ideas of nature have affected our conceptions of the environment. Are wilderness areas necessary for preserving "wild nature"? Or are they managed and commodified leisure resources in which "wild nature" has to be controlled? (For instance, think about the policy of removing "problem" bears in Yellowstone who have gotten too used to humans and their garbage.) Should every species be saved from extinction, or should some be allowed to expire because of "natural selection"? But how would we define "natural selection" in today's world, when new bacteria are formed in reaction to antibiotics used for medical purposes and industrial chemicals permeate the biosphere, possibly affecting our own ability to reproduce? If the bioengineering of a

better tomato means introducing salmon genes into the tomato, does that violate the integrity of both tomato and fish? Are wild salmon superior to farmed salmon if they are basically the same genetic organism, and on what basis are they superior? Are wild salmon preferred because they are valued by a culinary market, because they may taste better? Or are they better for environmental reasons, because the farming of salmon causes a significant amount of pollution? Should wild salmon be valued just because they are authentic, the "original" fish? Or should salmon be preserved because they are sacred beings to several Northwest tribal peoples, who have developed reciprocal relationships to the fish over thousands of years? Obviously, what is "natural" is highly contested and therefore deeply political.

Using Arguments from Nature as a Tool of Power

The arguments and controversies examined in this book, then, are not about the old debate between nature and nurture. I want to move beyond that way of thinking to critically examine the power of the idea of "the natural" and "nature." The persistence of the debate between nature and nurture begs the question about why those divisions (nature/nurture, nature/culture, biology/society, natural/artificial) have such power in certain cultures, especially U.S. culture. The answer is that these distinctions are tools of power. Historically, calling something "natural" places it in an arena of truth, inevitability, and immutability, beyond the reach of social criticism or democratic dialogue. Understanding the history of these ideological uses of the concept of nature and examining the multiple ways in which the politics of the natural affect our social and environmental policies permits us to critically assess various solutions to environmental problems and social inequalities. Under the world-spanning threat of global climate change, such a critical perspective may make the difference in having a world of elite green fortresses in a sea of poverty and war or having an open, equal, and sustainable society.

Those of us who are engaged in and subjected to Western (that is, Anglo-European), especially U.S., dominant cultural and political discourses (encompassing a major part of the world now) are familiar with the idea of nature being invoked to settle arguments or determine policy directions. This is in part because nature has a special place in the founding of Western and particularly U.S. culture. Since the Enlightenment, nature has played the role of foundation, truth, ground—replacing the older European feudal framework of religious order, divine right, and ordained social hierarchy. The overthrow of traditional European monarchies and

the establishment of new republican democracies were based on the idea that "natural law" rather than divine law should be the determining source of the rule of law. This radical shift in political arrangements was based on the idea that (some) men were naturally equal and had natural rights inherent in their status as (male) humans and as such were able to rule themselves rather than be ruled by kings and queens.

However, these revolutionary men did not intend to eliminate racial, gender, and class hierarchies that supported their own privilege and power. (This is why I call their understanding of human rights "huMAN" rights.) Some way of justifying the continuance of certain social hierarchies had to logically fit with arguments for natural law. Thus, the idea that some social inequalities were naturally determined developed hand in hand with the idea that freedom and equality were natural rights. In the same period as a series of revolutions brought modern Western democratic politics into being through a celebration of the natural rights of "man," the new modern sciences of botany, biology, anthropology, and primatology were "discovering" a host of "natural" differences that proved the superiority of white European men over European women and certainly over all Africans, Indians, and other subjugated peoples. Thus, while upper-class white European men were freeing themselves of feudal and monarchical structures, they could conveniently argue that others were naturally unfit for the same rights. Those Others included darker-skinned peoples, European women, and in some cases lower-class European men of particular ethnicities such as Irish, Mediterranean, and Slavic peoples (Merchant 1980; Schiebinger 1993). Such logic even allowed slaveholders to see themselves as champions of freedom, given that freedom was understood to be "natural" to white men while slavery was "natural" to Africans (Africans being understood as less "civilized") (Morgan 1975).

The effect of the legitimating function and long historical dominance of this set of contradictory ideas about nature is that Westerners often use the idea of the natural to justify either the way things are or the way we think things should be. To say that some phenomenon is "natural"—for instance, women doing most of the domestic work and child care around the world or men being more likely to use violence—seems to settle the question for many people. Not surprisingly, arguments from the natural often settle the question for those who benefit from the social arrangement in question; tragically, these arguments can sometimes also convince those who suffer from inequality and exploitation to accept their situation.

Arguing that something is natural tends to prevent an examination of whether the situation is just or right or desirable. For example, instead of

questioning the conventions of the contemporary gender division of labor, some might argue that women doing most of the domestic work may be unfortunate, but it is part of "nature's plan" (connected to women's biological ability to give birth) and therefore the best arrangement. This argument conveniently obscures the ways in which men can do much domestic and child-care work beyond the actual birthing and breast-feeding that are biologically determined. Women's unequal domestic responsibilities are far from natural, even if they may have been, in specific circumstances, tied to women's biological ability to give birth. Aside from actually giving birth and breast-feeding, other caregiving activities and domestic work have no biological basis for being gendered. Gathering fruits, weeding a field, holding a baby, using a microwave, sewing a shirt, washing a sick elderly person, or driving a kid to day care are not acts determined by nature.

The pattern of seeking a biological or natural basis to justify inequalities of sex, ability, race, and class is not merely located in an origin story of Euro-American democracies—in other words, something that happened a long time ago in the 1600s and 1700s—but is repeated throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in discursive and institutionalized practices such as eugenics, social Darwinism, Nazism, IQ testing, exclusionary immigration laws, sterilization policies, and certain problematic racialized and gendered projects within employment law, educational policies, and scientific research. Because of this history, those less privileged by "naturalized" social arrangements are rightly suspicious of arguments from nature. Are these "natural" justifications for social inequalities continuing into the twenty-first century? Contemporary debates and trends in popular culture suggest that they are.

But the politics of the natural are complicated. Because of the importance of nature as a legitimating idea, there has been a liberatory possibility in strategically arguing from nature against social norms. Several groups of people originally left out of the Enlightenment social contract have used this liberatory aspect of arguments from nature effectively in many historical cases. For instance, antislavery activists (and later, civil rights activists) argued that if one believed that black people were human, then they must deserve full human rights, since the Declaration of Independence stated that "all men are created equal." Those rights, as the U.S. founding documents state, were meant to be conceived as "natural" rights, inherent in the status of being human (or at least male, according to the founders). A more contemporary example of a liberatory argument from the natural is the strategic power of the insistence by many gay and lesbian activists that sexual orientation is biologically innate and thus unchangeable, "natural"

and therefore deserving of social acceptance. This point of view argues against hundreds of years of seeing same-sex practices as "unnatural" and seeks to remove the taint of perversity from same-sex relationships by seeing them as just as "natural" as heterosexual relationships.

Finally, arguments from nature have been used to sustain and inspire numerous environmental struggles. Seeing nature as valuable to human society, or as valuable in itself, has been an important basis for struggling to preserve, protect, and respect animals, plants, ecosystems, and the planet. Environmentalists have had their own complicated debates about what is natural and what is artificial; whether humans should manage nature or leave nature alone; whether environmental decisions should be made based on scientific, cultural, or spiritual grounds. But the shared sense that nature should not be damaged and that entities in their "natural" state are valuable and deserving of our protection—for their own sake, as a touchstone for human understanding, and as the basis for human life—is a core concern of environmentalists and has been a strategically effective and liberatory use of arguments from nature.

Looking over these different uses of arguments from nature, we can see that the contested and illimitable social meaning of the natural means that the same kind of arguments can be and have been used strategically many times for both conservative and progressive ends. One should not always assume that if an argument is being made that some phenomenon is natural, especially a social phenomenon, then it is necessarily an argument meant to prop up social inequality. But one can (and should) be skeptical of such arguments, given their historical uses as justifications for human and environmental exploitation.

In particular, as environmental activists struggle to preserve and support environmental health, integrity, and sustainability, their ways of thinking about and arguing for nature need to be carefully examined for the worrisome possibility that problematic assumptions about nature and the natural that have been used to oppress groups of marginalized peoples are being unintentionally promoted. For example, in 2004, the Sierra Club was thrown into turmoil by some members' attempts to protect against the "natural" increase in population thought to be caused by Latina/o immigrants who "naturally" had more families and thus, in their view, endangered the environment. These members tried to have the Sierra Club promote anti-immigration policies as a way to protect U.S. natural resources, despite the ways these same anti-immigration policies were being used to support racism and the exploitation of immigrant workers (Chea 2004).

Furthermore, some environmentalist discourses about nature may not be the best way to achieve environmental goals, because they may contain unexamined assumptions or justify problematic arrangements that support environmental degradation as well as human exploitation. The Sierra Club example above fits this case as well, since policies that are exploitative of and harmful to immigrant workers and depend on racist attitudes toward those workers, such as the lax restrictions on pesticide use in U.S. agriculture, are environmentally polluting of food, water, and soil.

Asking people to become critical of any claim to the natural, from any position, sometimes creates anxiety that an insistence on the sociality of nature means that one is arguing that nature does not exist for itself; that seeing nature as socially constructed means that we can do whatever we choose with the nonhuman environment; that nonhuman entities and places will therefore have no integrity that must be respected by humans. This conclusion seems extremely problematic to me, and I reject it passionately. A seriously critical position on claims to the natural need not leave us in a state in which "nature" is infinitely flexible, always already socially constructed, immaterial, and endlessly exploitable. To persistently question the status of the natural does not mean that we should reject the materiality, the corporeality, the autonomy, or the agency of the nonhuman (or the human, for that matter) (Haraway 1991, 1992). Nor should we deny out of hand all indications of biological differences, as long as we can ensure that social bias does not affect our understanding of them (which, given the long history of the misuse of arguments from the natural, can be a very difficult thing to determine). Humans are inside, coexisting, and interdependent with nature rather than outside and independent of it. Human biology is responsive to and changed by our environments, just as part of human nature is to change environments; whether those changes are for the better or worse needs to be carefully judged. Thus, the human and nonhuman environment is co-constructed, and there are material (and should be ethical) limits on our interaction with "nature"—whether land, animal, body, water, air, or the planet (Bird 1987; Cuomo 1998; Sandilands 1999). Unless we are willing to recognize the deeply political and ideologically variable status of "nature" in our culture, however, we cannot adequately discuss and decide these important questions about our interaction and use of the environment. So I argue that a relentlessly critical examination of claims to the natural is the best way to learn to respect natural beings and processes (including our own natural status as animal-humans or humanimals).

Patterns of Nature in U.S. Popular Culture

What are the dominant uses of symbols of nature and arguments from the natural in U.S. popular culture? In teaching this material as a class for many years, I have learned a lot about these patterns from my students (to whom I owe a giant debt for their questions and contributions).¹ One of the things I always did with my U.S. students, early in the class, was a wonderful exercise suggested by Carolyn Merchant in her useful book *Radical Ecology* (1992). I recommend that readers try this exercise for themselves. In this exercise, students are asked to reflect, in writing, on their personal histories and the relationship between those histories and their understanding of the environment. They are specifically asked what environmental values, or understanding of nature, arose from their social class, their racial/ethnic identity, their gender, and (an element I added to Merchant's framework) their sexuality.

After the essays were written and students had had a chance to consider the unusual notion that their social locations might influence their conception of nature, I would usually take some of a class period to ask the students to brainstorm about what "nature" meant to them. I would write these words and phrases so that all could see them, and then we would discuss the patterns that developed. Though a wide variety of things could be associated with the idea of "nature," there were, inevitably, consistent patterns that showed up in the U.S. context. This exercise demonstrates that the concept of nature is immensely flexible and variable, yet there are still repeated patterns of meaning that can be discerned, and these patterns are historically as well as culturally specific.

For my U.S. students, one of these patterns was a sharp split between human and nature ("anything 'not us,'" one student offered); another was the idea of nature as a source of purity and regeneration; another was nature as inevitability (a law of nature, an instinct, a dictate of behavior, whether individual, social, or environmental); another (especially for my students from the small farming communities of eastern Washington) was nature as source of food, as site of labor and economic productivity; another was nature as wildness, unpredictability; another was nature as the source of scientific knowledge; and another was nature as the location for play, leisure, and physical action. It was rare to encounter notions of nature as urban, as community, as constructed in interaction with humans, as autonomous agent, or as self.

These patterns could be predicted, given my usual pool of students (primarily but not only white, middle class, from the state of Washington)

and the history of Western ideas about nature. In Raymond Williams's wonderful book of cultural and historical definitions, *Keywords* ([1976] 1983), he says, "Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the [English] language" (p. 219) and goes on to declare, "Any full history of the uses of nature would be a history of a large part of human thought" (p. 221). Williams ([1976] 1983, 219) identifies three main senses of "nature":

- (i) the essential quality and character of something;
- (ii) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both;
- (iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings

In these definitions, one can see the likelihood of confusion between the "is" and the "ought" of nature—how Westerners commonly understand nature both as the ways in which things are materially and as the ways in which they are meant to be, instinctually and essentially.

Another scholar of the meaning of the word *nature*, William Cronon, has come up with a list of meanings of nature quite similar to my students' list but also containing some notions rarely found in our brainstorming in class. In his introductory essay to the important collection *Uncommon Ground* (1996, 34–50), Cronon identifies the following versions of nature that arose out of the conversations among the academics who contributed to the volume:

- Nature as naïve reality
- Nature as moral imperative
- Nature as Eden
- Nature as artifice, as self-conscious construction (such as parks)
- Nature as virtual reality
- Nature as commodity
- Nature as demonic other, as avenging angel, as the return of the repressed

My students tended to be comfortable with the first three ideas (nature as real, as right, and as good) and the last (the "fury of Mother Nature" cliché, so often used on the Weather Channel). But the idea of nature as artifice, as virtual reality, and as commodity tended to be rejected vehemently. My students wanted their nature to be "real" in some way or another, revealing a strong and common assumption that the natural and the artificial are essentially different (though, as it turns out, any attempt to

define the boundaries between the two always generates a lively, unresolvable debate). They also wanted their nature to be untouched by the dictates of the capitalist market economy. Thinking of nature as co-constructing reality with humans meant to them that the force of nature as a location of immutable rules and dictates, a concept in which they were deeply invested, was uncomfortably diluted. My students were often resistant to the idea that nature had a history, both in the sense of being thought of differently at different times and by different cultures and in the sense of being composed of a changing, dynamic set of interrelated entities (including humans) existing in chronological dimensions. Donna Haraway's important concept of "naturecultures" (2004) is meant to encompass these two meanings of nature as a historical entity and, though resisted, ultimately proved a very useful neologism for my students (and, obviously, for me as well).

Although nature is a concept that is essentially contested (that is, it cannot be resolved into one broadly accepted and fixed meaning), as Cronon and many others have pointed out, it is at the same time a powerful force and flexible source of legitimation. Given the diversity and the inconsistency of both Cronon's and my students' lists of meanings for "nature," it is not surprising to see arguments from the natural made from almost any social or political viewpoint to justify widely divergent and even opposing positions. But identifying common patterns, repeated narratives of nature, allows us to analyze serious social and environmental consequences of the deployment of these repeated ideas.

Advertising Natures

As John Fiske (1989) has pointed out, popular culture is a dynamic location where important struggles between those more powerful and privileged and those less powerful and privileged are often carried out. Because it is an arena of intense commodification and because postindustrial global capitalism is always seeking out new niche markets, subcultural oppositional meanings expressed in fashion, food, music, art, and other social practices are constantly being incorporated into dominant expressions of nonoppositional support for buying particular products. At the same time, new oppositional meanings are continually created, sometimes through the very process of consumption itself.

In a chapter called "The Jeaning of America," Fiske describes the process of "excorporation" (subcultural oppositional cultural practice) and "incorporation" (dominant recasting of oppositional meaning into new commodities) as an ongoing dance within the semiotics (or meaning-making practices) of the global economy. Uses of the idea of the "natural" are

frequently tokens in this process. His primary example of this process of excorporation and incorporation is jeans, the way in which a garment that at one time referred to the working class in the 1930s and 1940s, was taken up by folk musicians and rockers in the 1950s and 1960s, and was worn torn and faded by young radicals in the 1970s has now become a ubiquitous item of clothing, signaling meanings of youth, status, and high fashion devoid of oppositional content. But even as these meanings changed, Fiske argues, jeans remained symbolic of "naturalness," representing many ideas associated with nature (freedom, comfort, informality, purity, and so forth), thus showing how connections with naturalness can mean many things at the same time that they obscure the sociality and variety of the messages being relayed (Fiske 1989).

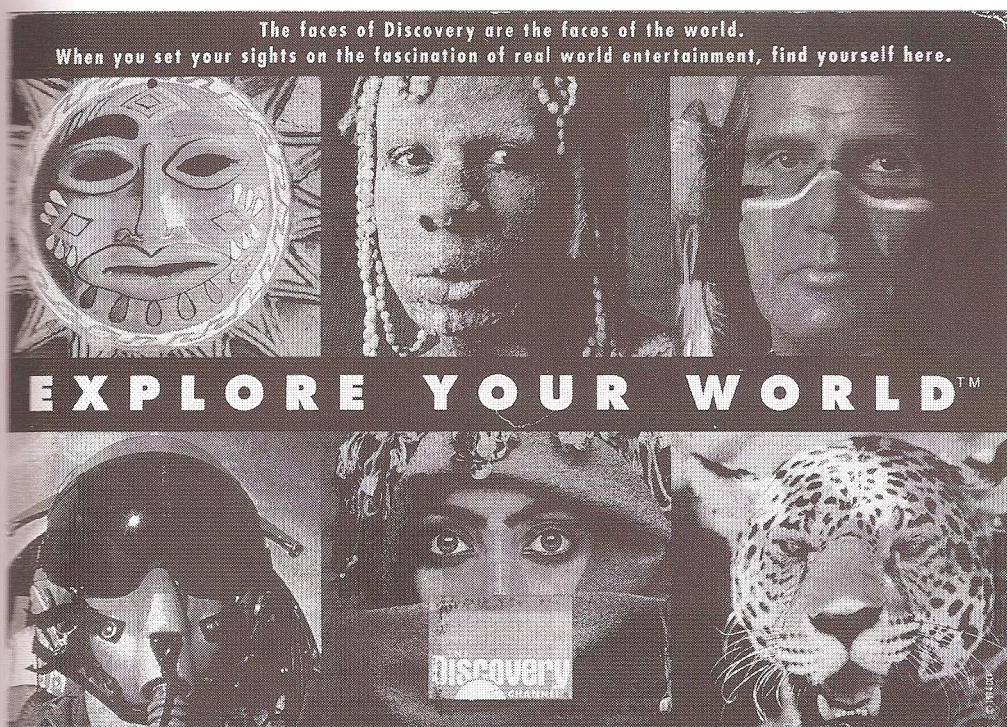
Examples from U.S. advertising demonstrate some of the uses of what I have been calling "naturalization." Over the years, my students and I have assembled an archive of hundreds of such ads, only a few of which I can refer to here. These ads exhibit various ways of using images of nature in connection with images of social stereotypes, showing the ubiquitous character of these patterns in U.S. culture. This is not because there is an advertising conspiracy to justify social inequalities with images of nature. Rather, when analyzing ads, you are examining something like a social unconsciousness, since ads are designed to reflect and appeal to our common desires, beliefs, and values. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2001, 89) explain,

Advertising often presents an image of things to be desired, people to be envied, and life as it "should be." As such, it necessarily presents social values and ideologies about what the "good life" is. It is also a central strategy of advertising to invite viewers/consumers to imagine themselves within the world of the advertisement. This is a world that works by abstraction, a potential place or state of being situated not in the present but in an imagined future with the promise to the consumer of things "you" will have, a lifestyle you can take part in.

Because the creators of ads hope to make some powerful symbolic connections with images that will spur people to consume their product, they often draw upon what they assume are widespread commonsense beliefs. Sometimes ads do so in the seemingly opposite approach, by flouting or contradicting widely held assumptions to associate their product with rebellious individualism and freedom from convention. But this move, while often masquerading as resisting conformist attitudes, can still serve to reinforce stereotypes and dominant logics. This might be called "the excep-

tion proves the rule" effect; we only notice that something goes against the grain when we accept that there is a grain. Sturken and Cartwright (2001, 206) put it this way: "Advertising uses particular codes and conventions to convey messages quickly and succinctly to viewers. While some ads intend to shock us or capture our attention through their difference, most advertising provides information through the shorthand language of visual and textual conventions. Hence, most ads speak a mixture of familiarity and newness." Ads thus create ideological connections, but often they do so because they reflect preexisting ideological narratives. Because they are designed to appeal to many people, ads are revealing items through which dominant patterns of social meaning in a given cultural context can be ascertained.

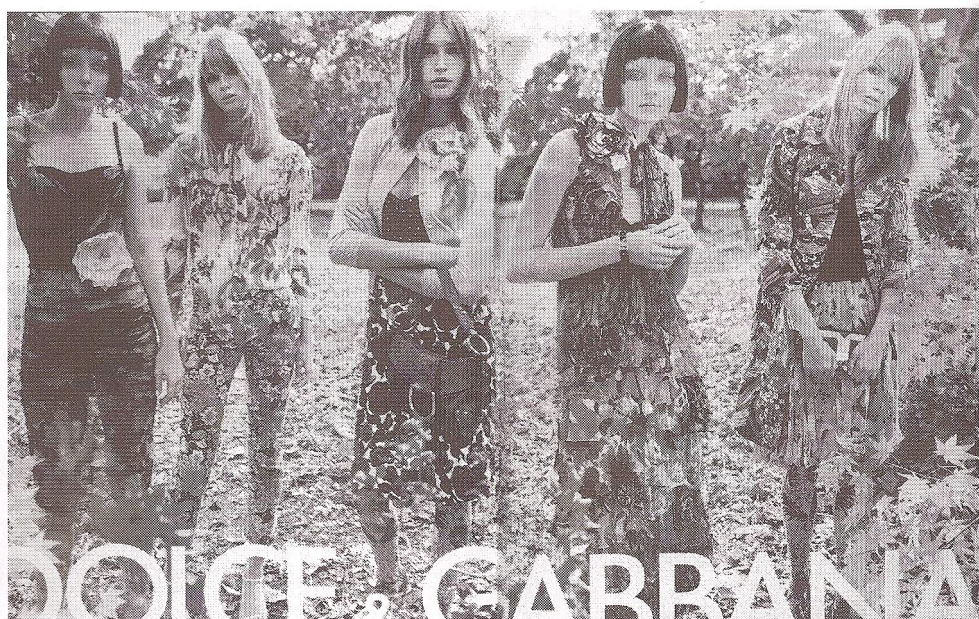
A 1994 Discovery Channel ad that tells the viewer to "Explore Your World" (fig. 1) is an image that summarizes many of the patterns addressed in this book. The ad shows six "faces": a Mayan or Aztec sun mask, an Aboriginal man, a Native American man, a jet pilot in a helmet and breathing apparatus, a woman in an obscuring headdress, and a leopard or jaguar. Because the ad exhorts the viewer to "find yourself here," I often begin an analysis of this image by asking my students to see whether they can find themselves in any of the images. Are they a wild cat? An Aborigine? The very few of my students who are Native Americans or Middle Eastern women are clearly not assumed to be the likely audience for this ad. Sometimes I ask my students to find the white man in the picture, and they frequently respond by pointing to the mask of the fighter pilot. In stating that these are "the faces of the world," the Discovery Channel ad presents only one face as the face of technology, of "civilization," and my students are used to associating white men with technology and civilization. The other faces—the vaguely Aztec mask, the Aborigine, the American Indian, the leopard, and the Middle Eastern woman (signified as Muslim by her headdress)—are all placed on the same plane, the natural, "primitive" backdrop to the process of exploration and achievement. The jungle cat is equivalent to the other "natural" faces, all of whom (except the fighter jet pilot) belong to those who have been colonized in the name of "progress" and "discovery." In this way, the colonization and exploitation of nature is made equivalent to the colonization and exploitation of darker-skinned peoples. The statement of the ad, "The faces of Discovery are the faces of the world," tells us that all the "nonmodern" faces are the ones to be discovered; the pilot's mask puts "him" in the position of discovery, given the close connections in U.S. cultural mythology among discovery, space exploration, and militarism. This set of assumptions—that "primitive" peo-



1. "The faces of the world" (Discovery Channel 1994)

ples are closer to nature, that there is a natural evolution from "primitive" to "civilized," and that history inevitably involves "progress" defined as a movement toward modernization and industrialization—makes the cost of such "progress," for nature and for particular people, invisible. The fact that the logo of the Discovery Channel is firmly over the mouth of the Muslim woman in effect symbolically silences the one woman present as well.

Another set of dominant patterns visible in late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century ads is various associations of gender and sexuality with nature. The representation of women as natural and nature as female is very common. This often places women in an inferior position in relation to men; they are depicted as closer to nature, the "primitive," the animal, the body, and farther from culture, the "civilized," the human, and the mind. Ads frequently portray women as landscapes, as surrounded or subsumed by nature, while men are often shown physically dominating nature, as in many ads depicting men skiing, driving cars, or rock climbing. Men's



2. Flower women (Dolce and Gabbana 2006)

nature is to *control* nature, while women's nature is to *be* nature. (John Berger [1972, 47] made a similar statement on the representation of women in art: "Men act. Women appear.") For instance, you can often see ads that show women (especially white women) as flowers or defined by intense floral or plant-related images. Figure 2 depicts women whose flowery dresses embed them so thoroughly in their leafy background that they can barely be distinguished from nature; it takes us a minute to notice that there are two pairs of identical women in this Dolce and Gabbana ad, their individuality matters so little. By contrast, one rarely, if ever, sees men as flowers.

But what *kind* of woman or man is depicted influences how they are visually associated with nature. There are patterns within patterns here, varying meanings of feminized or masculinized nature articulated by differences of race, class, and sexuality. In a rare image of a man surrounded by and subsumed within nature, from an article entitled "Natural Man" (fig. 3), the man appears to be Latino, with brown skin and carefully coiffed, dark curly hair, offering a coquettish smile while surrounded by fruit. The accompanying article is about Philip Berkovitz, the founder of a line of skin- and hair-care products called PhilipB, and the text assumes a close

NATURAL MAN

Philip B whips up beauty recipes in the kitchen.

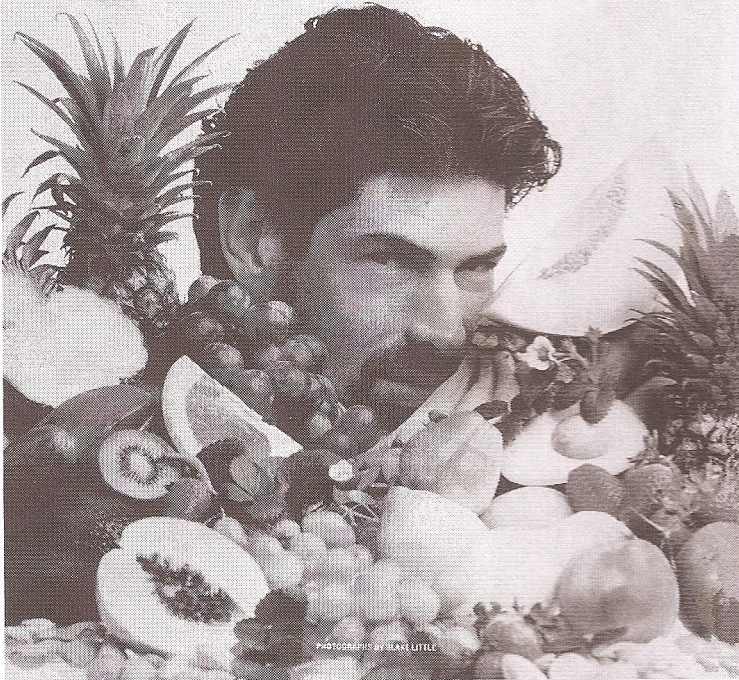
By Judy Ellis

Everyone understands that apples and pears, tomatoes and thyme are good for you. Philip Berkovitz, founder of Philip B Botanical Hair and Body Treatment products, wants you to know that they're also good *on* you. "Before there was a beauty industry, people relied on the earth's elements and nature's harvest to

nourish and revitalize skin and hair," observes the Los Angeles beauty expert. With his food-based body-care products, Philip redefines this age-old tradition, and the result is a veritable feast for the hair, skin and senses.

Mixed with the purest of ingredients and the highest percentage of essential

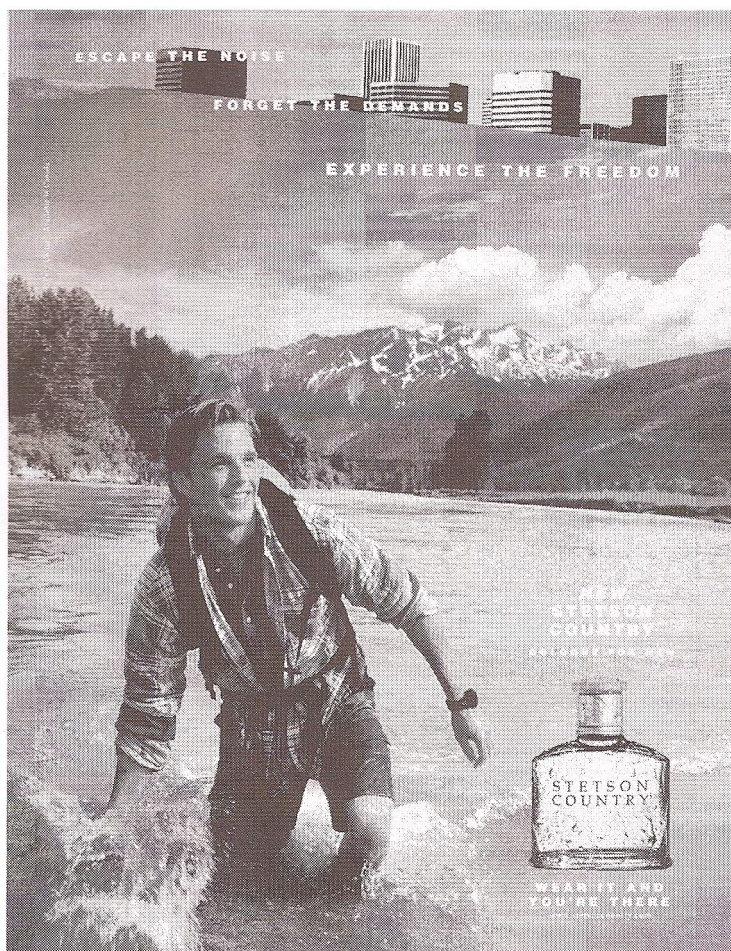
oil extracts of any products on the market, his line includes such savory-sounding products as White Truffle Oil Shampoo with Hops and Nettle Extract, and Wild Cucumber and Blue Orchid Body Lotion. Claims Philip, "Other botanical products' extracts constitute only 2 percent. Mine run as high as 34 percent."



PHOTOGRAPH BY BLAKE LITTLE

3. "Natural man" (Mirabella Magazine 1999)

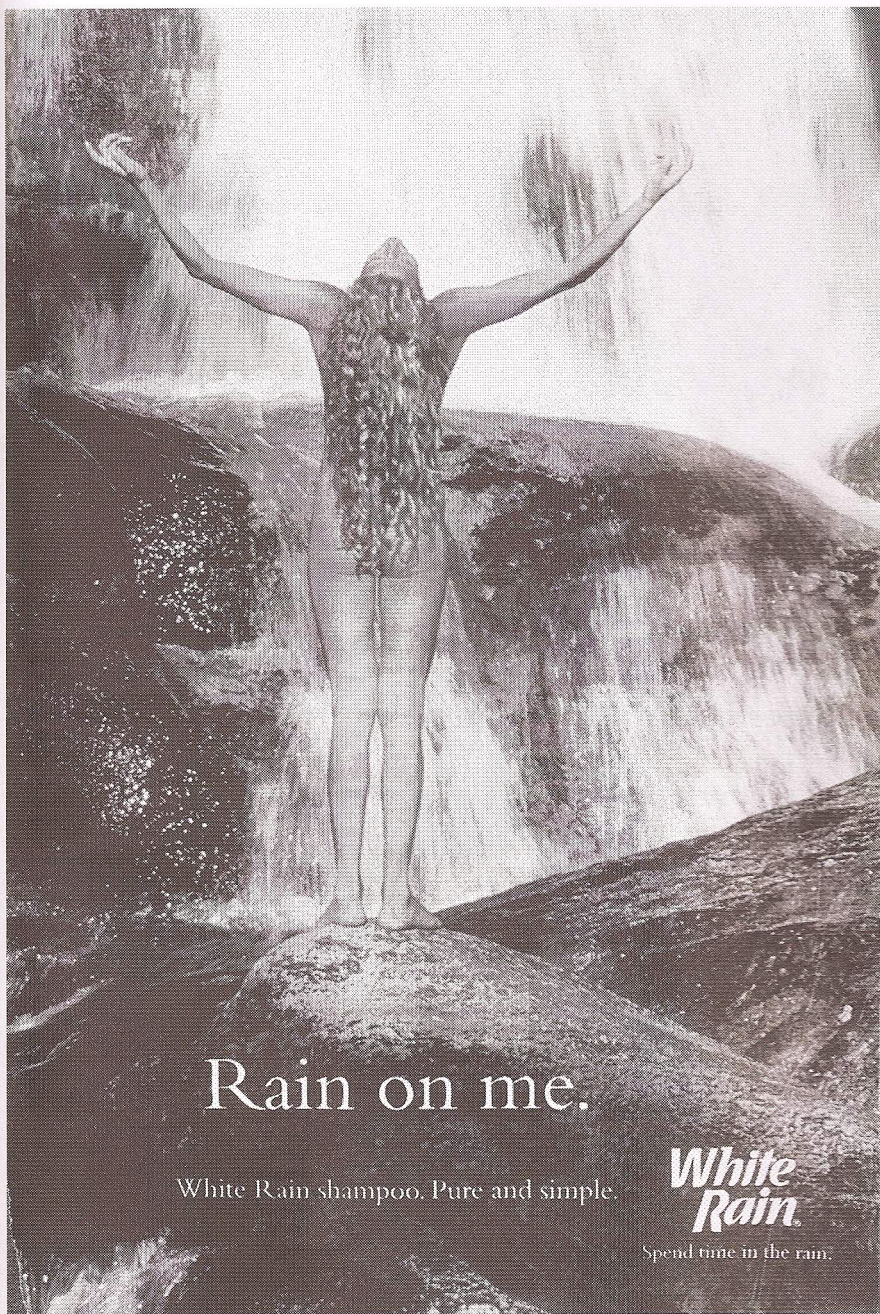
connection between the idea of "natural" products and health. The coiffed hair, the smile, and the association of the word *fruit* as a derogatory word for a gay man assists in this image to convey the idea that if a man (especially a brown man) is portrayed as surrounded by or enmeshed in nature, then he is a feminized man (that is, stereotypically gay). When a man is shown actively engaged in and in control of nature, he is usually depicted as white, straight, and very stereotypically masculine. For example, a Stetson



4. Nature is freedom (Stetson Cologne 1999)

cologne ad (fig. 4) shows a white man in the midst of exuberant exploration, escaping from the dark, claustrophobic city to the "freedom" of the country. In splashing his way up a river, he epitomizes strength, control, and manly success.

Another key pattern within a pattern is the association of white women with nature used to represent purity and health, as in an ad for White Rain shampoo in which a naked blonde woman ecstatically raises her arms in supplication to a powerful waterfall (fig. 5). Another version of this asso-



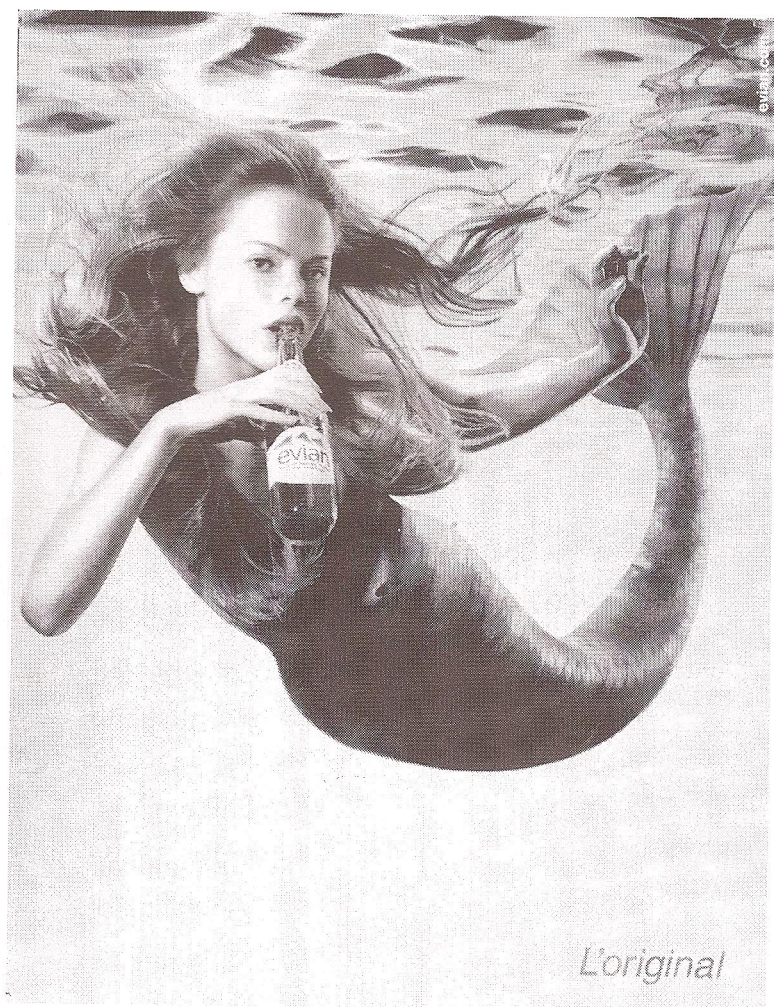
Rain on me.

White Rain shampoo. Pure and simple.

**White
Rain.**

Spend time in the rain.

5. Worshipping purity (White Rain 2001)



6. Mermaid (Evian n.d.)

ciation of white women with nature as purity is the Evian mermaid, who, as part fish, is a sensuous, fabled creature reveling in the purity of water (fig. 6). When a man is used in the complementary Evian ad, he represents "l'original" by symbolizing the "primitive"—he is a brown-skinned man dressed as an Inuit, or Eskimo (to use the colonizer's term for these indigenous people, one that is referenced in figure 7 by the "igloo" the man is making). In this Evian ad, in a common visual association, indigenous



7. "Eskimo" (Evian n.d.)

people are closer to nature, depicted as more authentic but less "developed" and lower on the chain of evolution than white people—therefore, they are "l'original" people, whose lost purity consumers can capture by using Evian's product.

Unlike the Evian mermaid, most of the images one encounters that associate women with animality are of a more sexualized and aggressive nature. Leopard patterns or leather clothes are often used to convey the



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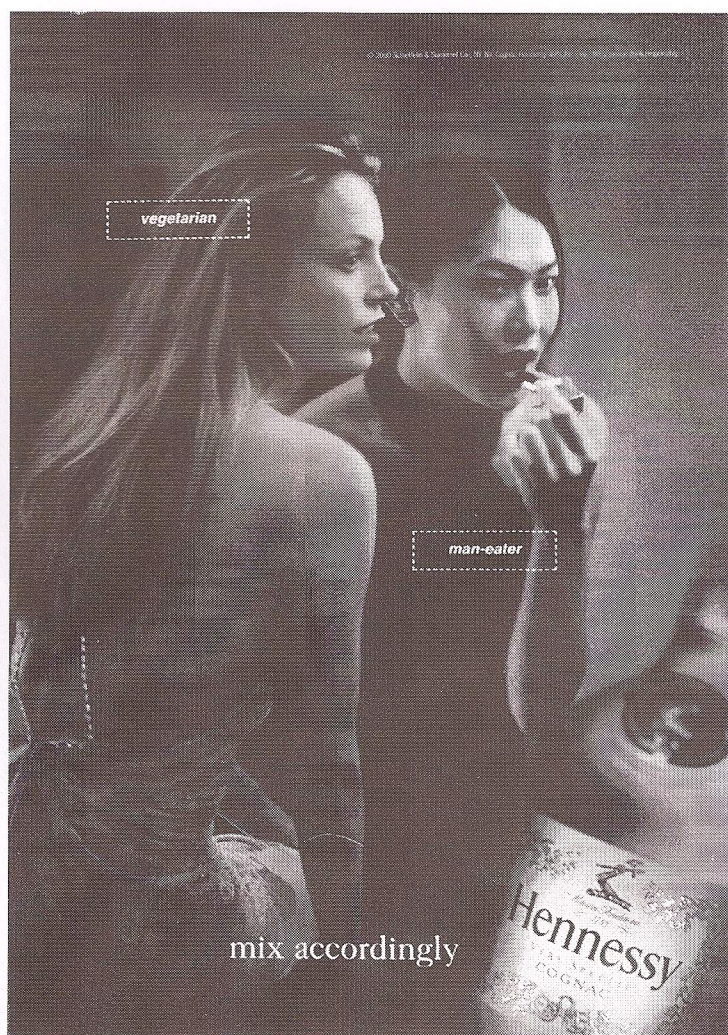
8. Sex, nature, and tanning (Supre 2004)



9. "Dressed to kill" (B-Boots 2002)

"animal" sexuality of women. Figure 8, for example, celebrates a white woman's passionate sexual attraction to the ocean, proposing the medically dubious idea that "natural" tanning products might be healthier for one's skin. The leopard-skin bikini the model is wearing is an advertising cliché, signaling the association of animals and female sexuality.

When women of color are represented as animals, these associations of aggressive sexuality tend to take an even more negative cast. An ad for B-Boots shows a brown woman, dressed in leather, displaying a ferociously clawed and aggressive demeanor (fig. 9). A handbag ad for Bottega Vega



10. "Mix accordingly" (Hennessy n.d.)

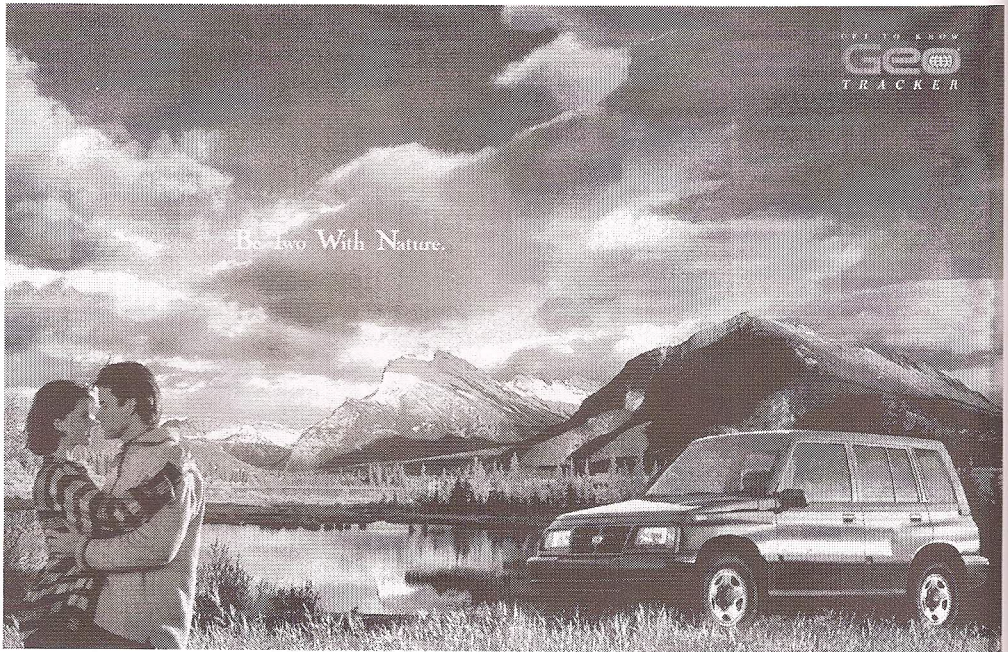
compares the leather of the purse with the textured skin of a black woman. And a Moschino ad shows a very dark African American woman displayed on a wall like a trophy animal, dressed in leopard skin.

Some advertising images present lesbians as inherently exhibiting this animal sexuality, as in two women cuddling in leather for Guess jeans. A Hennessy ad combines many of these patterns of naturalization in one image (fig. 10). Here, two women who are to be "mixed accordingly," vaguely

hinting at some nefarious same-sex and cross-racial activity to come, have small labels placed above their heads. The white woman, blonde, slim, and dressed in white—all signs of purity—is a “vegetarian,” thus refusing to even eat animals let alone be associated with them. In contrast, the Asian woman, dark, dressed in black, applying very dark lipstick to an open mouth, is designated a “man-eater,” not merely a voracious animal herself but a man-hater as lesbians (and feminists) are stereotypically assumed to be. This image repeats a long-standing sexist dualism that women are either pure or corrupted, good girls or bad girls, including the racist overlay of the association of good with white and bad with dark skin. But the messages embedded in this image work also to convey other ideas: the association of female sexuality with animality, of women of color as dangerous and abnormal, of same-sex sexuality as “mixing” those that are naturally meant to be kept apart. At the same time, promises the Hennessy ad, all of this danger and perversion is incorporated as pleasurable and erotic, especially for a male viewer who is in proper control of the situation (which seems to mean buying the right cognac).

Another common set of patterns in ads shows nature as heteronormative, that is, supporting the idea that heterosexuality is the only natural, normal and acceptable sexuality. Some examples are images such as a Geo Tracker ad that exhorts the male and female pair to “be two with nature” (fig. 11) and a clothing ad that shows a man and woman together and states, “We’re all love junkies. Nature made us that way.” A Winston ad foregrounding a mule’s head clearly wants us to reject any sexual liaison that is nonreproductive as “unnatural,” as it says, “The mule. The offspring of a donkey and a horse. They cannot reproduce. A perfect example of not leaving well enough alone.” Thus the idea of purity in tobacco is associated with naturalness, normative sexuality, and health in one move.

Another, very different but pervasive, pattern of naturalization presents nature as something to conquer, to claim, and to control; this pattern is often associated with ideas of nationalism or militarism. The images that use this pattern usually are related to ideas of straight, white masculinity as dominant, hard, powerful, muscular, and competitive. Car ads revel in this imagery, especially those vehicles (such as trucks, SUVs, Jeeps, and Humvees) that are associated with this kind of dominant masculinity. As these tough vehicles bound over a rough, natural landscape, the ads convey a sense of achievement in conquering nature, a thrill of power in being able to penetrate into hidden, desirable, and wild places. These images are often also associated with nationalism as well as masculinism, as in an ad for a ski area that asks, “Should you plant your poles? Or the flag?”



11. "Be two with nature" (Geotracker n.d.)

Images of conquest such as these are also frequently associated with the mythology of the frontier and with associations of Native Americans as nature, as objects of colonization and expropriation. One of the richest images that represent this pattern is not actually an ad but part of a story published in the fashion magazine *W* about the private life of Ralph Lauren, the clothing designer, entitled "Ralph's Teepee" (Reginald n.d.). Apparently, when Ralph wants to get away and relax, he can do so in his very own buffalo-hide teepee on his 14,000-acre ranch in Telluride, Colorado, a teepee he designed himself and filled with trendy furniture and furs. His ability to create a teepee, to expropriate Native American culture and land in the West, is celebrated as a mark of his strength, his success, his independence, his individuality, and his competitive drive. "I don't look at anyone else's teepee. I make my own rules about how I want to live," says Lauren in this story, completely obscuring the costs to others of his "lifestyle choices" and the way in which only his wealth allows him to make his own rules.

All of these patterns of naturalization use ideas of nature, sexuality, animals, the earth, and the natural not only to produce the desire to consume

a product (which is the function of advertising) but also to reproduce views that underlie many social inequalities: that nature is female, white women are pure, female sexuality is dangerous, women of color are closer to animals, heterosexuality is more natural than homosexuality, "real" men are competitive and violent conquerors of nature, and indigenous peoples are primitive by being closer to nature or are inherently ecological. Though ad designers seldom consciously intend to support these ideas, they do want to use images that are powerful and bring associations of pleasure, desire, and achievement—dominant associations that may depend on ideas that support unequal social hierarchies. They reveal the degree to which the American psyche remains deeply riddled with prejudices that the ads rely on and reinforce.

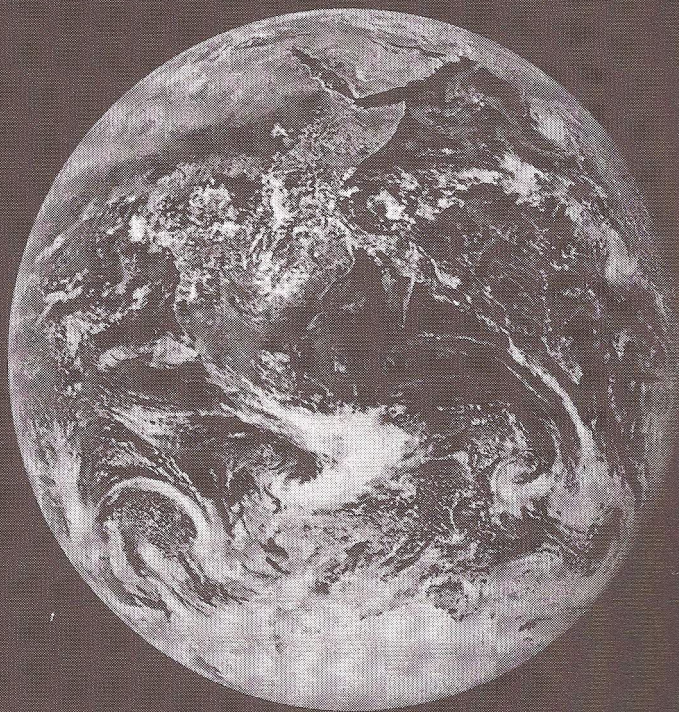
Environmentalism Images of Nature

While finding stereotypes in ads may not be surprising, the same kind of problematically naturalizing images that are seen as culturally powerful by advertisers are also widely used in environmentalist messages. Is it troubling to find the same kinds of visual associations for both consumerist and environmentalist messages? Indeed, how are advertisers relying on what appear to be environmentalist images to ease their buyers' minds about the ecological dangers or the "goodness" of the products being sold? Clearly, ads such as the Supre one for tanning lotion promote a common theme that "natural" equals "healthy" and suggest that environmentalism should be seen as positive. The idea that nature is pure or healthy is a long-standing one. But a positive association with environmentalism has only become dominant in the past twenty-five years, as the environmentalist movement has become more accepted—as long as a mainstream version of environmentalism is being referenced. This encourages environmentalist associations to be used even when the content of the ad is by no means ecologically positive. For example, American Spirit cigarettes, the very name of which uses the image of Indians to stand in for a notion of purity, produces an organic line of tobacco. The idea that organic tobacco might be more than marginally healthier to smoke is patently silly (though it might be better for the workers picking the tobacco). Another example is evident in the environmentalist image of the whole Earth that appeared in the series of Humvee television ads that ran in the spring and summer of 2004, combining references to the militaristic origins of the Humvees with the notion that being able to ride roughly over the earth (let alone use the amount of gas the Hummers use) is pleasurable and desirable. These television ads begin with the excitement of driving the vehicles, then inevitably

end with the camera panning back until we see the beautiful blue curve of the Earth seen from space.

This image, of the Earth seen from space, is an important one for U.S. culture, as it was first achieved during the cold war and the space race that was supposed to represent the epitome of U.S. ingenuity, technological ability, and competitive spirit (see chap. 3). Yaakov Garb (1990) points out that this beautiful image of the Earth seen from space presents it as an object that can be gazed upon at will, owned, and contained. Garb argues that this is a form of feminization of the Earth, as this kind of gaze is historically a view that maintains masculine power over women as objects. He also argues that the whole Earth image presents the planet as naturally harmonious and pure, allowing us to fantasize that all the occurrences on it are uniform and in balance, without conflict and pollution. Both of these tendencies (dominating the Earth and seeing it as naturally harmonious) inhibit us from understanding the Earth as a dynamic, complex, interrelated set of entities enmeshed in both conflict and cooperation, an Earth in crisis. The whole Earth image allows us to universalize the environmental dangers to the Earth without having to understand the way in which differential power and privilege means that responsibility for environmental devastation is not equally shared (Garb 1990).

For example, a public service message from the Ad Council about recycling shows an image of the whole Earth above the statement "If you're not recycling, you're throwing it all away" (fig. 12). While this is a good message, it gives the false impression that individual recycling is the key to "saving the planet" and that everyone's lack of recycling, no matter who they are and where they fit in the chain of production and consumption, is a cause of the most important damage to the planet—that is, one person could "throw it away." The image is also used positively in a Women, Environment and Development Organization poster, which, under an image of the whole Earth, states, "It's Time for Women to Mother Earth." I have discussed elsewhere (Sturgeon 1997) how this image tries to use the association of women with nature and with maternalism to inspire women to environmentalist actions, but it ends up being a troubling message about women having to do the (house)work of cleaning up environmental damage. In both these cases, the whole Earth image is problematic in that it tends to obscure the underlying causes of environmental problems and encourage superficial solutions. Since, as Joni Seager argues (1993), the biggest environmental polluters and exploiters are governments, militaries, and corporations—all patriarchal institutions in which men have most of the power—and since, as many have pointed out, Global North countries



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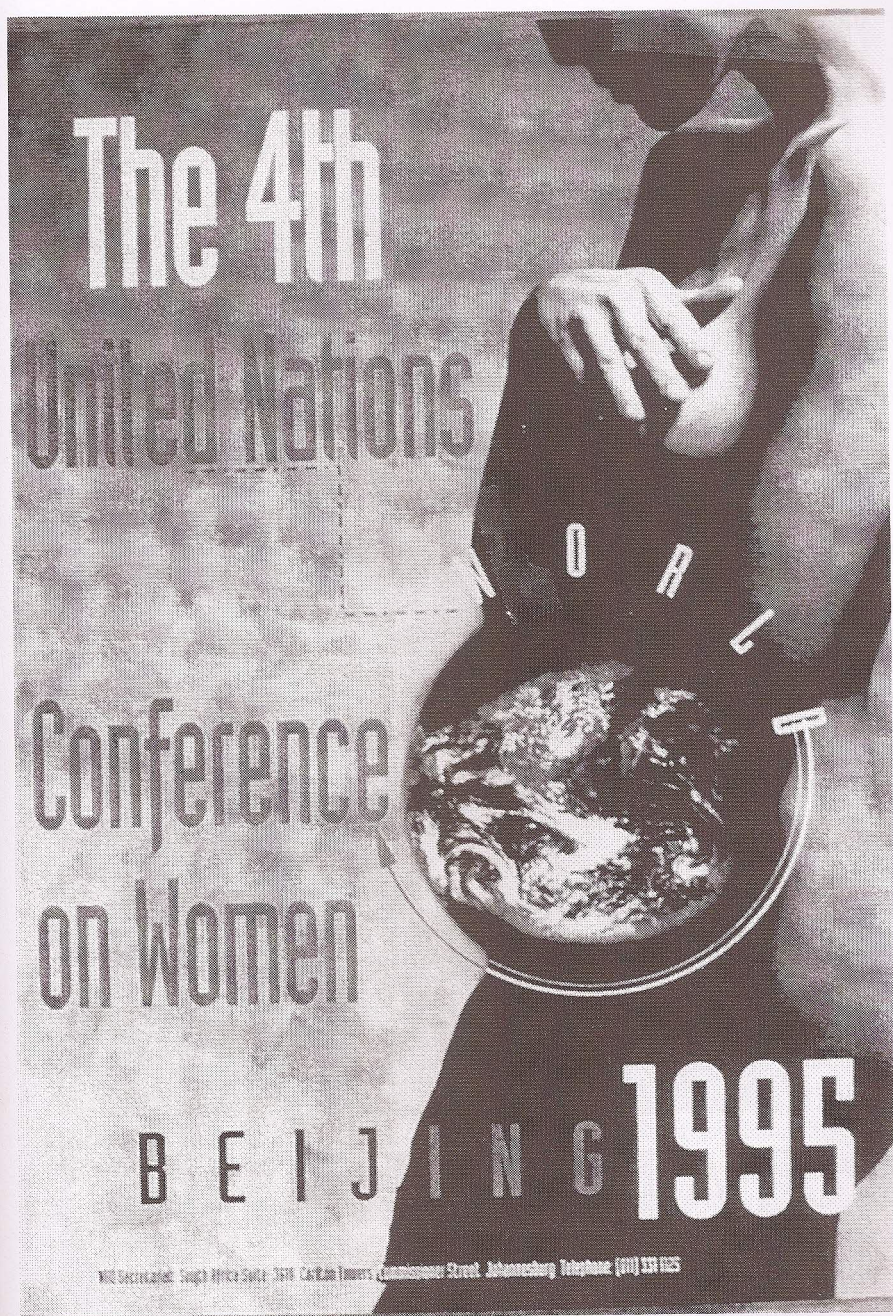
12. "Throwing it all away" (Ad Council 1988)

use more environmental resources than do Global South countries, images of a whole Earth that obscure these kinds of differentials of power, resource use, and access to decision making do not help us to think more clearly about environmental problems and solutions.

Environmentalist images that depend on the notion of woman as Mother Nature abound. One of the posters for the Fourth World Women's Conference in Beijing shows a woman with an Earth in her womb (fig. 13), and a button about threats to rain forests depicts the forest as a woman (fig. 14). One of my favorite artists, Judith Baca, in her beautiful mural painting *Balance: World Wall* (1990), uses an image of the world as pregnant female. Her written description of the mural does not emphasize nature as feminine but celebrates a balance between male and female: "'Balance' represents the return to a healthy balance between the male and the female, the yin and the yang, the moon and the sun. The central image of the new-born sun is surrounded by the rhythms of the earth and the sky—the cycles of their moon, the rise and the fall of the tides, the planets that, when grown together, replenish the soil."² Despite this intention to depict a balance, the overwhelming and moving image of the sun being born at the end of a vagina-like river is clearly an image of nature as female. This image, like all of the ones I have just discussed, is very beautiful, and as environmentalist messages, they can be moving. But the use of the images of a Mother Earth brings us back to dualist notions of culture as male and nature as female that have proven to be destructive for women and for nature.

What we see when we look at these patterns of "natural" images, then, is that even when environmentalists create images of nature, they fall into the trap of stereotyping. Because of the pervasiveness and deep emotional resonance of these tropes, it is very hard to avoid using them and still create powerful environmentalist messages. But the costs of such resonant images may be too high for people and for the environment alike. One final example summarizes many of the patterns of nature just discussed and provides insight into the damaging effects of these images.

The Michael Jackson video *Earth Song* (1995) is a powerful story about the devastation visited on the planet, people, and animals by environmental destruction and war.³ It is an emotional plea for fighting against these things, using three narrative frames: rain-forest destruction in South America; the poaching of animals, particularly elephants, in Africa; and the ravages of war in Bosnia (all places unnamed but clearly evoked in the film). Intercut with these three narrative frames are images of Michael Jackson, walking through and sometimes dancing in a burnt, smoking, and devastated clearcut forest. In these scenes, despite his torn black and red clothes



13. Giving birth to the whole earth (Beijing UN Conference on Women 1995)

SAVE THE



RAINFORESTS

14. Woman as rain forest (button)

of mourning, Jackson is a bright beacon within a dark vision of a dystopian future (or perhaps the present). As he sings, sorrowfully and angrily, Jackson plays the role of both messenger and savior, calling on everyone to be moved to action and to reverse the damages to people and the Earth.

The video opens with several introductions to the three crises featured. In the first, South American indigenous people standing in a group watch as gigantic rain-forest trees are cut down. They are dressed in loincloths, marked thereby as indigenous and thus "naturally" in touch with the forest. While bulldozers rip out huge trees, they stand helplessly by. One member of the tribe, a woman with a beautiful and wise face, stands in the front of the group as though she is their leader.

The second set of images introduces a group of African tribal peoples (in this case, the Maasai, though not identified as such in the video), also dressed in "native" costume and jewelry. The people watch in grief as elephants are killed, their tusks stripped and their carcasses left to rot in the sun.

The third scene is an unidentified Eastern European country, in which the people, dressed in Western clothes, are fleeing from a bombing. One man, who is the focus, seems to be the father of a family, and his little daughter is shown riding a bike. When the bomb hits, we see the girl's bike riderless on the ground, the man's sorrowful eyes, and then his body lying on the ground, his eyes closed.

As Jackson sings out in anger at these events, the sense of desperation and helplessness seems to shift—to anger and a call to action. The Maasai, the indigenous rain-forest tribe, and the Bosnian people fall on their knees and dig their hands into the earth. Jackson stands between blackened stumps of trees, flings out his arms to each side, and, grasping the two trees, begins to proclaim the absolute need to stop the damage and suffering. Clinging to the trees, in the position of Jesus on the cross, Jackson seems to summon up a powerful wind, which we see flowing over the planet seen from space. As he does this, images of the indigenous South American tribe, the Maasai family group, and the Bosnian family are intercut with him. They are all kneeling on the ground, with their hands in the dirt, pulling the earth toward them in supplication. In particular, we see the South American tribal woman over and over, her wonderfully passionate face expressing power and growing hope, as, in rhythm with the pushing and pulling of the dirt, the wind begins to reverse the damage. Literally rewinding the images, the elephants grow back their tusks and rise to their feet, the trees leap into the air and heal their trunks, and the Bosnian man, lying on the ground, opens his eyes, rises to his feet, and walks again.

Despite the power of the images and music, Jackson's environmentalist message, especially in its appropriation of indigenous people as symbolic of animals and nature, supports a widespread but highly questionable notion that environmental problems can be solved only by "returning" to a "primitive" past. The idea is underlined that a hunting-and-gathering culture is the only kind that can truly be in harmony with nature. The strong Christian imagery of Jackson on the cross and the Bosnian man rising again like Lazarus belongs to the already industrialized landscape, one that shows no signs of natural renewal but nevertheless somehow is the location of the power to accomplish change. This mixed, contradictory message may be emotionally moving, but it also produces a sense (given that most viewers believe the idea of a wind that has the power to heal the planet is a fantasy) that the damage has been irreparable and there are no realistic, pragmatic solutions. Only faith or magic or Michael Jackson or some unknown force that would return us to a mythical prehistoric but ecological past can help us. Otherwise, we are doomed to ecological disaster. Furthermore, power remains with the industrialized landscape, and Jackson presents himself as a leader of the entire world (a dubious premise, I think). While Jackson may be lionized by this message, no pragmatic environmentalist practice is offered as an answer, when in fact actual sustainable environmentalist practices have been developed by numerous people, including those in the Global South.

The closing frame of *Earth Song* solicits donations to Jackson's foundation, Healing the World, which had several promising programs focusing on children's well-being around the world but is now pretty much defunct. Like many of Jackson's charitable efforts, it seems to have been started with much fanfare and went on to accomplish various successful but short-term programs before it disappeared through lack of attention or support by the star (Hall 2004). The temptation to see this pattern, like the visual and musical plot of *Earth Song*, as simply about the aggrandizement of Michael Jackson is strong, but there is another interesting aspect in the video's use of images of the natural as pure, primitive, and innocent.

Earth Song's emphasis on saving the rain forest, protecting animals, and ending the suffering caused by war reflects issues of long-standing interest to Jackson. But I think it not accidental that *Earth Song* was produced in 1995, fairly soon after Jackson's short-lived marriage to Lisa Marie Presley, which occurred quite suddenly following the first time Jackson was accused of child molestation. He had also just faced numerous rumors that he had extensive plastic surgery, including efforts to lighten his skin color. Though he strongly denied both of these accusations at the time, one can-

not help but speculate that Jackson, in the face of constant gossip about his "unnaturalness," in terms of both his sexuality and his appearance, wished (perhaps unconsciously) to associate himself more closely with nature and the natural. How he (and the director, Nicholas Brandt) accomplished this brings out the dangers of using popular images of nature often chosen to try to raise people's consciousness about environmental problems.

Jackson turned to dominant tropes: nature as female; people of color, especially tribal peoples, as closer to animals and nature; "primitive" cultures as naturally more ecological because they are separated from the corrupt influence of "civilization"; nature as pure and nontechnological; and environmental problems as caused by individual action and individual belief rather than corporate, governmental, or institutional practices. All of these ideas ironically reinforce social inequalities and direct us away from understanding the root causes of environmental destruction or learning about practical environmental solutions. These tropes both support social stereotypes and divisions of labor that underlie social inequalities and point us toward ways of thinking about environmental problems that obscure their systemic corporate and political causes.

Because powerful cultural discourses about what is natural have been involved for so long in arguments about social justice and equality as well as in arguments about how to solve environmental problems, it is past time to look at the intersections of these arguments. The fact that commonplace ideas about what is natural have been implicated in justifying both social inequality and environmental exploitation means that we must make an effort to examine how these areas are linked. We need to entertain the idea that solving environmental problems must also involve eliminating social injustices and vice versa. That we still might want to strategically argue from the natural in opposition to certain social and economic arrangements is a possibility, but we should do so with fuller knowledge of the history and effects of such arguments.