

A Nature Beyond Desire: What's Sex Got To Do With It?

Melody Hessing (*Douglas College*)¹

I am walking on the beach -- late afternoon, early March, Vancouver. One of those wind-cut, sun-kissed West Coast days that whistles through the sadness of long winter nights and the stressed out drudgery of teaching or nursing, whatever job substitutes for life. My toes curl to taste mollusc-ridden mudflats, my eyes are fixed on that bald eagle landing in the alder, my senses feast on luscious seaside smells, sounds, and sight.

I love this place, but can I count the ways? How can I explain my desire to be here, my thoughts uncurled like kelp streaming in the sea? Is this happiness physical, the product of endorphins, the rhythms of heart-and-lung machinery? Or is my longing a cultural product, inspired by riffs from *The Sound of Music*? Is this the desire of a post-modern abstraction, the quest for the "other"? For some, perhaps that snow cone of Mount Wrottesley reflects a longing for sex, conquest, a vision of women on top. What's sex got to do with it? Is my joy a physical or a cultural product of "desire"?

We inhabit a post-millennial universe that has superimposed the merger of technology and a market-driven consumer culture on a planet swarming with biodiversity. Yet three-quarters of Canadians live in urban areas, where what we know of nature is mediated and controlled by human design. Nature is purchased as a commodity through parks programs (if dwindling), environmental education, the media, and leisure activities, and through our consumption of products marketed in the context of nature. We insulate our lives from the force and wiles of natural systems, thus experiencing a nature that is at times glorified, at others abandoned like roadkill. The "otherness" of nature is objectified, framed by its marginalization in our lives.

To desire nature is to yearn for the authentic experience of a natural world we no longer inhabit. We *want* material goods for their utility, the status they confer, and the delight of their possession. But desire is more than wanting. Desire is lusty, sexual, insatiable, addictive. Desire has a smoky aura; it is sensual, inviting, unfulfilled, a stranger in a dark-lit bar on the wrong side of town. Desire capitalizes on the estrangement of human alienation by offering to satisfy our incompleteness with a sexual fix.

¹ Melody, etc.

We learn to desire nature as sexual commodity. Nature – portrayed as setting, props, or actors – is a pitch for physical activity, sports, automobiles and clothing. Human bodies are presented in gender stereotypes, in which heterosexuality is unleashed by an indeterminate, perhaps pheromonally inspired physical attraction. Nature makes us sexy, sexual. Women are “hot” (sexually adept, thin, toned, tanned); men are “buff” (tough, firm, muscular, rugged). Both men and women, but especially women, are portrayed as sexually attractive and desirable. Sexuality oozes from the glossy pages of periodicals, where cleavages swelter and muscles ripple in the endless foreplay of advertising. The bodies in advertisements for outdoor goods are young, trim and athletic. In an era suffused with individualism and the endless outpouring of *Desiderata*, these bodies have a right to be there. And the universe is unfolding as it must, with cars, SUVs, bikes, and MP3 players adorning the primitive décor of mountain stream or rimrock canyon.

The field of desire is ever expanded by commercial interests. We celebrate the otherness of the natural world as physical challenge – boulders to climb, icefields to traverse, rivers to ford – as something beyond our everyday lives. And it is. Nature is a destination resort with all the trappings, stuff to keep you busy for weeks at a time, depending on which package you book. Nature’s day care. “Outside” is a magazine, a theme park, the place you wear your new Mountain Equipment jacket. “Planet Earth” DVD’s provide ecotainment. The natural world is there for human consumption. Extreme sports and eco-challenges, sport and/or competition set in tough terrain, transform nature to an outdoor gym, a prop for the glorification or abuse of the human form. An hour cramped over smelly plastic at Fitness World is a “work-out” (rather than a “work-in”). *Survivor* series on television promote the competitive, commercial and sexual character of human interaction in a wilderness setting.

While humans are sexualized in and by nature, nature too is depicted as sexual object. Advertising portrays natural areas as settings conducive to human sexuality. A sexualized nature howls the call of the wild; it is the *come-on* for cruises and adventure tours, a drawing card for ecotourism. Nature is a stroll, a location for the consumption of sexual favours. Exotic settings foster honeymoons, getaways, the personal association and intimacy that we have come to associate with romance. We want to “make love” in it, and to it. We have “had”, “consumed”, “done”, depleted, and wasted natural systems. We have known nature, in the Biblical sense, although our cognitive understanding of its richness remains limited.

What we see when we look at the commercial portrayal of nature may be flagged as “sex”, but it is a narrow, anthropocentric and homogenized version of sexuality. Nature has been universalized, transformed in Club Med monocultures as suitable for human vacations (but not for the long-term stays of indigenous species.) Generic natural settings are “locations” which obscure the complexity and array of biophysical systems behind the scenes. Nature is sanitized (in a luscious sort of way) and idealized through this portrayal. The experience of nature transmitted through commercial media coverage remains limited and pedestrian. The clickety-clack of a streetcar named Desire follows the same route every day, predictable in its destination and time-slot, while the exotic aspects of the journey hover, growl, and snort just beyond the periphery of our senses.

The potential for releasing desire-cum-sexuality from its commercial and institutional associations (heterosexual, dualistic, repressed), and to re-invent it on our own terms has been identified by theorists embracing a range of post-modern feminist perspectives. A “sex-positive sexuality” offers a means of self-expression and empowerment, but also is a link to a physical nature that has been squelched by patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism (Kemp and Squires, 2000). Emerging views of sexuality would embrace a range of sexual preferences and identities that in turn inspire “a radical questioning of social and cultural norms, notions of gender, reproduction and the family (Smyth 1997: 362). These perspectives have the potential to liberate both sexuality and our perspectives of nature from a cultural essentialism that remains heterosexual and dualistic.

And yet, contemporary post-modern musings on sexuality are problematic not only due to the abstractions of the discourse, but in their anthropocentrism and sex-essentialism. Sex-positive sexuality invites personal exploration, tolerance of sexual expression, and a healthier climate of sexual relations. But a preoccupation with human sexuality verges on an *egofeminism*, rather than the exploration of the sexual and reproductive issues linked to survival of the ecosphere. The danger of sex-essentialism, the conflation of the personal with personal identity, is that we miss out on the larger picture (the range of sensuality beyond the sexual, and the complexity and range of biodiversity) as that picture shrinks from the post-modern view.

While sex-positive sexuality promises true sexual liberation, this is only one aspect of human potential. Desire incorporates, but goes beyond sex. Desire includes longing and memory and yearning for existence beyond human artifice. Gertrude Stein is said to have said of Los Angeles, “There is no there, there”. That’s just what we hanker for today. A there, there. In nature. A biosystem, a cosmos independent (if only relatively) of human beings but knowable through and of them. This politicizes the quest for nature, rather than romanticizing and personalizing it through the fruition or exploration of our own sexuality.

Our experience in nature teaches us about a range of physical capacity, emotional potential and cognitive learning that we have only begun to understand. What might we learn from a genuine, informed experience in nature? That sex is a part of nature, inherent to our physicality, intrinsic to the natural world of which we are a part. We also learn from nature that sex is only one part of the picture, a point on the continuum of sensuality. The sensual aspects of the natural world delight us, because they stretch and entertain our own capabilities. They also exist independent of our delight, shimmering in their own constellation of being. The *otherness* of nature entices in its revision of the mundane. The allure of nature is the call to celebrate a more complete expression of not only our, but others’ physical capacities.

An expanded version of human sensuality fulfills a spectrum of desire – for friendship, space, peace, mountains, knowledge -- the full range of experience. How, for instance, can we understand that force field flavouring the first hyacinth of spring? How does orogeny explain the ripple of coastline that I walk? The appreciation of nature, both sensual and intellectual, requires time, curiosity and education. It requires the

preservation of the natural world. Desire might invoke the full range of sensory and cognitive capacity. It extends beyond the sexual, and beyond the intellectual, to include the joint custody of mind and body. As Diane Ackerman states:

To understand, we have to “use our heads,” meaning our minds.To begin to understand the gorgeous fever that is consciousness, we must try to understand the senses....and what they can teach us about the ravishing world we have the privilege to inhabit. (1990: xix).

The whaleback profile of Bowen Island humps to mountain ridges, scrimshaws a Richter Scale horizon, edges out of sight in the Tantalus range. I inhale this view, my sight barreling down luge-runs of avalanche chutes, dancing with crossbills in green nubbins of krummholz, cruising with ravens above radiant clearcut slopes. Walking the edge of the North American plate, I am suspended above continental drift and the no-fault collision of tectonic plates, awaiting the migration of snow geese. My desire is fulfilled.

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