

The International Journal of Ecopsychology (IJE)

Volume 2
Issue 1 *Vol 2 (1)*

Article 7

4-30-2021

Desingularizing “Self” and “Nature”: Bruno Latour’s Politics of Nature and Lorraine Daston’s Against Nature

Editorial Board
intljournal.ecopsychology@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/ije>



Part of the [Alternative and Complementary Medicine Commons](#), [Cognitive Psychology Commons](#), [Community Psychology Commons](#), [Counseling Psychology Commons](#), [Environmental Public Health Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), [Health Psychology Commons](#), [Human Ecology Commons](#), [Medical Humanities Commons](#), [Other Philosophy Commons](#), [Outdoor Education Commons](#), and the [Place and Environment Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Board, Editorial (2021) "Desingularizing “Self” and “Nature”: Bruno Latour’s Politics of Nature and Lorraine Daston’s Against Nature," *The International Journal of Ecopsychology (IJE)*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/ije/vol2/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The International Journal of Ecopsychology (IJE) by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. For more information, please contact kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu.

Didactic Entr’acte

IJE’s Editorial Board

Desingularizing “Self” and “Nature”:

Bruno Latour’s *Politics of Nature* and Lorraine Daston’s *Against Nature*

One cannot underestimate the effects that singularizing “self,” “society,” and “nature” have on conversations (politics, ecology, psychology, etc.) about the many mansions and potential affiliations between organisms and their *umwelt*. Since the ancient Greeks, argues Latour (2014), western ideas about “self,” “society,” and “nature” have brought forth a notion of these concepts or “entities,” and their respective relations, in ways that, usually, leave “nature” out. Particularly, the science-vs-affectations divide has made our understanding of a deeper sense of “ecopsychology” almost impregnable--a false dichotomy to begin with:

If we concede too much to facts, the human element in its entirety tilts into objectivity, becomes a countable and calculable thing, a bottom line in terms of energy, one species among others. If we concede too much to values, all of nature tilts into the uncertainty of myth, into poetry or romanticism; everything becomes soul and spirit. If we mix facts and values, we go from bad to worse, for we are depriving ourselves of both autonomous knowledge and independent morality (2012: 4).

The construct “nature,” and similarly overreaching concepts, invites dualistic projective and/or observer perspectives, and moral stances and behaviors. Latour endeavors to look for a new consilience. Daston’s (2019) foundational and key questions offer a continuance of thinking about the constructs of “self,” “society” and/or “nature” in similarly differentiated ways:

Why do human beings, in many cultures and epochs, pervasively and persistently, look to nature as a source of norms for human conduct? Why should nature be made to serve as a gigantic echo chamber for the moral orders humans make? ... Nature has been invoked to emancipate, as the guarantor of human equality, and to enslave, as the foundation of racism. Nature’s authority has been enlisted by reactionaries and by revolutionaries, by the devout and secular alike. In various and disperse traditions, nature has been upheld as the pattern of all values: the Good, the True, and the Beautiful (2019:3).

Continuing in contrapuntal fashion, and from an informed “ecopsychological” perspective, *looking to embrace “the whole of nature” with the “totality of one’s self” is a gluttonous impossibility that betrays the real non-trope insatiable consumerism*. In a less dramatic but equally biased manner, and in Latour’s words, the seemingly arbitrary or overlapping amalgamation of “nature” as a “blend of Greek politics, French Cartesianism, and American parks” (2014: 5), blinds us to envisioning a multiplicity of ‘selves’ interacting in a multiplicity of ‘natures.’ Acting within this empty space of ‘nature,’ and oblivious to their own cultural constructions, well-intended people fail as “militant ecologists” precisely because they are blind to their own biases:

In short, from this vantage point it is simply a matter of asking the militant ecologists to stop being so naive as to believe that they are defending, under cover of nature, something other than a particular viewpoint, that of Westerners. When they speak of putting an end to anthropocentrism, they manifest their own ethnocentrism (2014: 32).

It is not at all clear that many thinkers, writers, or “therapists” in “nature” are keen on these differences judging by how persistent they are at moralizing a vast and incalculable horizon of seemingly endless processes into, obviously, anthropocentric maxims. To quote Daston again:

For centuries, philosophers have insisted that there are no values in nature. Nature simply is; it takes a human act of imposition or projection to transmute that “is” into an “ought.” On this view, we can draw no legitimate inference from how things happen to be to how things should be from the facts of the natural order to the values of the moral order. To try to draw such inferences is to commit what has come to be called the “naturalistic fallacy” – a kind of covert smuggling operation in which cultural values are transferred to nature, and nature’s authority is then called upon to buttress those very same values (2019: 574-87).

When understood in this light one can appreciate why it is in the interest of the Gaia acolyte, for lack of a better term, to make sure these ideas remain as vast and inexplicable as possible, as a wide canvas on which to paint their affectations. Latour expands his own set of caveats with comparisons between western and non-western views of ‘nature’:

Non-Western cultures have never been interested in nature; they have never adopted it as a category; they have never found a use for it. On the contrary, Westerners were the ones who turned nature into a big deal, an immense political diorama, a formidable moral gigantomachy, and who constantly brought nature into the definition of their social order ... Nature plays no role in either world. Among Westerners, because their world is political through and through; among non-Westerners, because they have never used nature as a place to set aside half of their collective! Whites are neither close to nature because they and they alone finally know how it works, thanks to Science, nor distant from nature because they have lost the ancestral secret of intimate life with nature. The “others” are neither close to nature because they have never separated it from their collective nor distant from the nature of things because they have always mistakenly confused it with the requirements of their social order. Neither group is either distant from or close to nature (2014: 43-46).

In the context of this volume and others to come, the above nuanced distinctions will be paid attention to, as a discipline and exercise in checking our own assumptions about anthropocentric variations of “affiliations” that emerge when we, unthinkingly and unwarily, juxtapose the constructs “self,” “society,” and “nature.” We shall be alert to those assertions (our own and those of others) that make claims so fantastic or all-too-well-worn that turn ideas about “self” and/or “nature” into continuing reiterations of “moral gigantomachy.”



Latour, B. (2014). *Politics of Nature: How to bring the sciences into democracy*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Daston, L. (2019). *Against nature*. *Untimely Meditations (Book #17)*, Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press.