

## Nature on the Move II: Contemplation Becomes Speculation

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**Abstract:** As the second installation of this triptych, this essay addresses the broader historical trajectories and cultural manifestations of Nature on the Move. In it I argue that recent forms of *nature for speculation* are discursively and visually rooted in an older, and more widely recognized, *nature for contemplation*. As it emerged alongside the industrial revolution, nature for contemplation already embodied qualities amenable to the production of a moving commodity nature: forgetting, abstraction, reification, and exchangeability. At the same time, however, it was popularly presented as immutable, immovable, and beyond capitalist value production. It took a great deal of cultural and intellectual labour for this nature's proto-commodity qualities to be realized and presented as a *fait accompli*. This has been achieved in large part by the mediation of relationships by images, or what Guy Debord (1995) called spectacle. "As the indispensable decoration of objects as they are produced today," (Debord 1995: thesis 15) spectacle provides the aesthetic articulation for what I call "eco-functional nature" – a nature that appears as though it can be moved around to optimize ecosystem health and economic growth. Production of this seemingly unassailable vision happens at a diversity of interconnected sites, where it is also often vigorously opposed. These constitute the *micro-political milieus* of decentered and apparently unrelated struggles over what nature is and what nature will be.

**Keywords:** nature, conservation, spectacle, fetishism, governmentality

### Introduction

In the first installation to this triptych, Bram Büscher posits the emergence of a "liquid nature" – a kind of "fictitious capital" no longer grounded in any specific material context or relationships.

Abstraction and financialization "are extending new possibilities for nature's speculative release into the realm of circulating money" (Sullivan 2013b:11). Liquid nature, Büscher further argues, requires "fictitious conservation – conservation without any direct basis in material, socio-biophysical nature." Through fictitious conservation, the valorization of actual conservation activities is alienated from those activities themselves. Fictitious conservation circulates with liquid nature, which it also authenticates and valorizes. Both nature and the conservation of nature have been rendered into circulating commodity forms.

While these developments may initially appear as sudden and counter-intuitive, emergent forms of

nature for speculation are actually rooted in older, and more widely recognized, forms of nature for contemplation. Lukacs (1971) has ascribed the pervasiveness of contemplation in modern society to Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, arguing that it is symptomatic of a generalized separation accompanying the alienation of labour's use value into exchange value by industrial capitalism. Over time, he asserts, people have increasingly become passive contemplators of the apparently autonomous movement of commodities, as a "kind of second nature" (Lukacs 1971:128).<sup>1</sup> The industrial transformation of commodity into a kind of nature, was accompanied by corollary transformation of nature into a kind of commodity, a spatially framed and putatively timeless view that people would pay to contemplate at a

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<sup>1</sup> This usage is distinct from current usages referencing anthropogenic environments (Hughes 2005: 157-158), though all share Hegelian roots (see Schmidt 1971: 42-43; Smith and Harvey 1984: 19; and Jappe 1999: 20-31).

comfortable distance (Cronon 1996; Neumann 1998). This was consistently achieved by the forced removal of people who lived and labored in landscapes, and the subsequent erasure of those removals (Igoe 2004).

Thus, as Sian Sullivan elaborates in the third installation of this triptych, making nature move first required making it sit still as an increasingly deadened object of contemplation.<sup>2</sup> The second section of this essay will accordingly examine how the putative stillness of nature for contemplation has been entrained to the movement of nature for speculation. My analysis is informed by Guy Debord's (1995) concept of spectacle, a uniquely specialized and powerful form of "capital accumulated to the point that it becomes image" (Debord 1995: thesis 34), and which mystifies and mediates the relationships of its own production (thesis 4). Debord further argued that spectacle's power to transform fragments of reality into a visually pervasive totality, produced "a separate pseudo world" (thesis 2), offered in exchange for the totality of actual activities and relationships, a world of "money for contemplation only" (thesis 49).

Abstraction of nature into spectacle, as we shall see, has turned it into money for contemplation *and* speculation. Via multi-billion dollar film and advertising industries, nature has moved onto screens that are seemingly everywhere (Mitman 1999; Brockington 2009). Such images also lend themselves to the simulation of nature in themed environments, through which multiple and far flung natures can be contemplated in one comfortable and conveniently located setting (Wilson 1993; Igoe 2010). Moving images of nature move consumers to buy products, take vacations, and to give money to worthy conservation causes (2013). Finally, spectacle provides visual testimony for a movable nature that can be "disassembled, recombined, and subjected to the disciplinary design of expert management" (Luke 1999:142). This is the basis for what I call eco-functional nature, which appears as though it can be calibrated to optimize ecosystem health and

economic growth. Eco-functional nature, I will argue, is indispensable to the current global policy consensus that the financialization of nature is the key to its salvation – a pseudo-qualitative accompaniment to complexly quantified forms of financialized liquid nature.

In addition to its abstraction of nature into circulating images and its visual embellishment of the practices and rationale of nature's financialization (cf. Debord 1995: thesis 15), spectacle offers a powerful technique for fostering and managing subjectivities appropriate to commodity nature (cf. MacDonald 2010). The ability to create the appearance of certain realities, even when those realities have not been – in fact cannot be – achieved, is in itself a powerful effect – particularly when the reality in question is presented as "nature:" "the inherent force that directs the world, human beings, or both" and "the material world itself" (Williams 1983: 219). Spectacle should therefore be considered as part of the wider mosaic that Michel Foucault (1983; 2007; 2008) called techniques and technologies of government (Debord 1998:2; Crary 2002:456).

In section three of this essay I will address the ways spectacle is produced and deployed in the intentionally modified and interconnected contexts that I call micro-political milieus of commodity nature. These milieus are sites for the production and consumption of liquid nature and fictitious conservation, as well as of diversity of decentered and seemingly unrelated struggles over what nature is and what it will be. One of my main motivations for sketching these milieus is the possibility of short circuiting spectacle, and its attendant mystifications, through the intensification of "channels, concepts, and processes that can link up and thereby intensify transversal struggles into larger collective, but discontinuous movements" (Nealon 2008:106).

## The Nature of Spectacle and the Spectacle of Nature

### Introduction

Historical treatments of nature, on the one hand, and spectacle, on the other, to the best of my knowledge have yet to be synthesized. The genealogical synthesis presented here focuses specifically on western, and

<sup>2</sup> The logic of deadened nature for contemplation is lucidly set out by Timothy Luke in his discussion of the Nature Conservancy as the Nature Cemetery. "Nature is dead," Luke (1997:68) argues, "material signs of its now dead substance need to be conserved as pristine preserved parts, like pressed leaves in a book, dried animal pelts in a drawer, or a loved one's mortal remains in a tomb."

predominantly North American, contexts. I begin somewhat arbitrarily, with 18th century land enclosures that accompanied Europe's industrial revolution and segregated countrysides into: 1) landscapes of production – for the production of wealth; and 2) landscapes of consumption – for leisure and contemplation only (for details see Green 1990; Neumann 1998; Igoe 2004). The creation of 19th century American parks as the ultimate landscapes of consumption revitalized this segregation to generate a widely recognized and eminently transportable abstract category of nature-as-big-outdoors (Cronon 1996).

While such abstraction is an important element of circulating commodity forms, the category of nature itself was consistently presented as immutable, immovable, and thus forever outside of capitalist value production (Brockington et al. 2008). Landscapes of production, by contrast, were celebrated, elaborated, and simulated by elaborate commodity displays, mass produced and embedded in new landscapes of consumption, from county fairs to world exhibitions. These displays not only effaced the labour that produced them, but also appeared capable of transcending their own materiality (Connerton 2009), qualities that were important antecedents to what Debord would later call spectacle. Nature and spectacle thus appear less as separate parallel threads than as strands of a double-helix becoming more tightly interwoven over time.

### The Nature of Spectacle

As noted by Crary (2002:457-458), Debord dated spectacle's origin to the year 1927 and "the technological perfection of the television. Right at the age when an awareness rose of the age of mechanical reproduction, a new model of circulation and transmission appeared ... spectacle was to become inseparable from this new kind of image and its speed ubiquity and simultaneity." This year also introduced the first sync sound films, which demanded more concentrated attention from viewers than previous moving pictures. Debord's concern with sync sound suggests that he saw spectacular power as "inseparable from a larger organization of perceptual consumption" – as near as possible to a total sensory experience (Crary 2002).

Shortly thereafter, the Third Reich and Stalinism demonstrated the power of these technologies for producing encompassing state-sponsored propaganda that Debord (1998:8) called "*concentrated spectacle*." American corporations and marketing firms deployed the same technology to produce "*diffuse spectacle*," an apparently decentered profusion of commodities on display (1998:8). While doubtlessly catalyzed by these technologies, diffuse spectacle is rooted in mid-19th century world exhibitions that inspired German economists to posit an "exhibition value to indicate the productive capacity of representation itself ... things gain value simply by their mode of appearance, quite apart from their use value" (Brain 1993:13-14).

Exhibition value proved and capitalized upon Marx's (1990) point that a commodity is "a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties." By exaggerating and manipulating the metaphysics of commodities, their use value was effaced in what Benjamin (1978:152) described as "a phantasmagoria that people enter to be amused." These were intentionally designed to overwhelm and disorient: giant glass buildings presented "an unending perspective that fades into the horizon" (Brain 1993:39), exhibit machines were also exhibiting machines (48), and panoramas moved past stationary spectators to simulate a hybrid collage of travel experiences (65). Such simulacra, Jameson (1991:18) held, "come to life in a society where exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the memory of use value is effaced." By the turn of the 20th century, exhibition simulacra were bursting their boundaries and spilling into their surrounding environs. Visitors to the 1900 Universal Exhibition found it difficult to distinguish the exhibition space from the rest of Paris (Brain 1993:10). This, argues Connerton (2009:60), was the beginning of diffuse spectacle, "an all embracing medium where people continuously interact with commodities."

Today this medium is indeed a kind of "second Nature," readily and ubiquitously visible in the environments with which consumers most commonly interact: cities, restaurants, freeways and rest stops, shopping malls, airports, train stations (and of course trains and planes themselves), not to mention theme

parks and all manner of entertainment venues and tourist attractions.<sup>3</sup> It is also working its way into places like schools, hospitals, and office buildings. All these environments incorporate a diversity of video screens, from towering jumbotrons to tiny televisions in taxicabs and airplane seats. They also provide settings for the production of commodified images, resulting in a recursive relationship between “reality and image” (eg. a jumbotron in Times Square promotes the Broadway production of *Madagascar* by endlessly repeating a sequence from the film in which the animals escape from the Central Park Zoo and wind up in Times Square). This is the basis of what Debord (1998:9) called “*integrated spectacle* – spectacle that has integrated itself into reality to the same extent that it was describing it, and that it was reconstructing it as it was describing it.”

Since Debord’s death in 1994, the boundary between actual and virtual reality has been further blurred by wifi and a diversity of portable communication devices. In my classroom a phalanx of glowing Macintosh logos mediates the space between me and the students, who are in actual and virtual reality at the same time. They listen to my live lecture and take notes while texting each other, shopping online, and updating their Facebook profiles. To spice things up I show a Youtube video of Slavoj Žižek lecturing from *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, saving myself the labour of preparation and them the labour of reading. Žižek defines “cultural capitalism” as a reality in which “the very act of consumption entails redemption for being a consumer.”<sup>4</sup> I rush to relate this point to the prosumption (simultaneous consumption and production) of nature (Büscher and Igoe 2013). I display a web site where users can track radio-collared polar bears to see how drinking Coca-Cola helps protect arctic habitats. Another invites consumers to adopt acres of virtual rainforest personalized with their names and graphic of their favourite endangered species, but a synchronized closing of laptops indicates time is up. Next time, I promise, we

will explore the transformations of nature that have rendered such presentations plausible.

### The Spectacle of Nature

#### *Nature for Contemplation....*

In contrast to 19th century exhibitions, which enshrined intensifying industrial production, 19th century national parks enshrined a special kind of “natural legacy.” While 19th exhibitions offered escape from industrial life into phantasmagoria’s where “commodities are now all there is to see” (cf. Debord 1995: thesis 45), parks offered escape from industrial life into putatively pristine realms, one of the main attractions of which was that commodities seemed to be absent (cf. Cronon 1996). In spite of these differences, exhibitions and parks operated by similar logics of abstraction and contemplation at play in the production of contemporary spectacle through which nature is now explicitly presented as the ultimate commodity.

Like exhibitions, parks effaced the conditions of their own production. Their displays of timeless wilderness for leisurely contemplation depended upon systematic clearances of their human inhabitants.<sup>5</sup> For the illusion of a timelessness to be effective, however, “this process of erasure had to erase itself” (Igoe 2004). Nature was thereby presented as reality without social or historical connections, an arrangement ironically requiring significant administrative and technical intervention. The contemplation nature in these terms, as Cronon (1996) aptly notes, was only possible by virtue of the modern conditions to which it was supposedly the antidote. For elites who championed American parks, however, this nature was nothing less than “the basis of universal truth available through direct experience and study. To study a particular instance offers a window onto the universal” (Tsing 2005:97).

These conditions present four important antecedents to spectacle: 1) forgetting, 2) abstraction, 3) reifications, and 4) proto-exchangeability.

3 For a detailed account of these transformations in North America, see Alexander Wilson’s (1993) *Culture of Nature: North American Landscapes from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*.

4 To view this video visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpAMbpQ8J7g>, accessed July 27th 2009. For the more adventurous there is of course the book by the same title (Žižek 2009).

5 For some time this aspect of parks was so under researched that Jacoby (2001) described it as “the hidden history of American conservation (also see Brockington and Igoe 2006). Since then the topic has gained more attention through a flurry of research, investigative journalism, and documentary films. For an overview of this extensive work I recommend Dowie’s (2009) *Conservation Refugees*.

Forgetting is essential to Lukak's (1971) theoretical elaboration of commodity fetishism: "the precise processes that produces commodities gets forgotten ... [and] ... manufactured artifacts ... fall prey to cultural amnesia" (Connerton 2009:43).<sup>6</sup> Forgetting is a precondition of reification, whereby artifacts appear to take on a life independent of their manufacture, "much like the laws of nature" (43). It is also figures centrally in abstraction, whereby artifacts apparently transcend their own material limitations (Büscher 2011). The notion that individual parks materially embody an ideal universal nature is a kind of abstraction, since this universal nature presumably transcends the material boundaries of any park in particular. The ability of one object (a park) to stand for a class of objects (imagined universal nature) is furthermore an essential element of Marx's (1978) theory of how commodities gain exchangeability, and the basis of spectacle as "money for contemplation."

Because parks were meant to be stable and enduring, however, the nature they displayed required further mediation to transgress its material boundaries. This came with the aforementioned advent of sync sound and television, paving the way for the nature film industry. By the 1950s technicolor nature films were a popular staple for western theatergoers (Mitman 1999), while freeways in the United States were transforming parks from a rarified elite playground into popular vacation destinations for millions of newly affluent automobile owners.<sup>7</sup> Nature became part of the wider current of consumptive experiences that exploded on the scene in the years following WWII (for details see Wilson 1993), presenting unprecedented possibility for its refinement into a reified commodity forms that is also generators of additional value.

The career of Frankfurt Zoological Society Director Bernhard Grzimek poignantly illustrates these refinements. At the end of WWII, Grzimek

set up shop in what would become Tanzania's Serengeti National Park. With revenues from his film *No Room for Wild Animals*, produced in 1955, he undertook an aerial survey of the now world famous wildebeest migrations. The survey was the centerpiece of *Serengeti Shall Not Die!*, an international best seller that won the Oscar for best documentary in 1959 (Bonner 1993). By the 1960s Grzimek presented a popular German television show called *A Place for Animals*, which he used to market non-existent tours to East Africa. He speculated that this would generate sufficient demand to bring the safaris into existence, and he was correct (Lekan 2011:225). Tourism is now Tanzania's second largest source of foreign currency (Igoe and Croucher 2007), while the royalties from *Serengeti Shall Not Die!* have built a world class headquarters for Frankfurt Zoological Society inside Serengeti. The headquarters remained there after colonialism, and indeed to the present day (Bonner 1993).

Grzimek's story reveals nascent formulations of a now fully blown "conservationist mode of production" in which, "through various mediations ... natural capital is converted into capital of a more circulating and globally ramifying kind" (Garland 2008:62). This is achieved in large part through the abstraction of nature into images. In addition to their multi-billion dollar value in the nature film industry, images of nature inform completely fabricated pseudo-natures in 3D blockbusters like *Avatar* and *the Lorax*. Images of conserved nature, and promises of conserving nature, are used to market everything from fast food to dish soap, SUV's to computer printers. Such images spread through the theming of space in airports, resorts, shopping malls, zoos, botanic gardens, and of course theme parks (Igoe 2010). Finally, as we have just seen, conservation NGOs use them to distinguish their brand in a crowded and highly competitive funding environment (Sachedina 2008). When images of nature are deposited in "image banks" (Goldman and Papson 2011:137), from which they can be withdrawn and reanimated for any of the purposes above, there can be no further doubt that nature is "money for contemplation."

<sup>6</sup> These ideas were a major inspiration for Society of the Spectacle (see footnote 1 above).

<sup>7</sup> The enjoyment of pristine wilderness by millions of people was of course a paradoxical arrangements, as evidenced by "bear jams," which happen when the supply of bears cannot meet the demand of photographers, resulting in hundreds of tourists concentrating around sparsely distributed animals. Parks in Tanzania experience similar phenomenon of "lion jams," and I imagine parks in India probably have "tiger jams."

*Becomes Nature for Speculation...*

But how might nature that is money for contemplation become nature that is money for speculation? Both require abstraction and reification, but in the case of the latter these are more meticulous and precise. As recent work by Sullivan (2013a:3; also 2013b) illustrates, the abstraction of nature into tradeable units of financial value is closely associated with “variously marketized forms of environmental offsetting,” which will reputedly resolve “contradictions between economic development and nature health.” Monetized ecosystem services theoretically correspond to land-based localities, nature banks, “where they can be situated and accounted for” (Sullivan 2013a:3). These notional connections inform “key design principles” for turning nature into money for speculation (Sullivan 2013a, 2013b; also cf. Büscher this issue; Fairhead et al. 2012).

Two of these are of particular relevance to the present discussion. The first is the need for an “ecosystem metric to permit exchangeability,” a “symbolic numerical signifier that can serve as an abstraction of ecosystem aspects in different places and in different times, such that these abstractions become comensurably with and substitutable for one another” (Sullivan 2013a:5). The second is the principle of “additionality,” which assumes that nature conservation would not have occurred without offset payments (7-8). While the illogic of these assumptions may seem self-evident, it merits brief mention here: making nature quantitatively fungible conceptually obliterates the unique qualities of specific ecosystems and the cultures of people who dwell within them, while the principle of additionality depends on counterfactual scenarios.

It is precisely in areas like this that nature for contemplation is most important to nature for speculation. The former becomes the latter not by turning into it, but like a becoming outfit, which enhances someone’s attractiveness to the point of becoming indistinguishable from them (as in when we tell a friend, “that outfit is you!”). Nature for contemplation suits nature for speculation, covering over its blemishes and lumpy bits while enhancing its finer qualities. Nature for contemplation is “the indispens-

able decoration”<sup>8</sup> of nature for speculation, and “the general gloss on the rationale of the system” that produces it (Debord 1995: thesis 15).

Productions of nature for contemplation have consistently and elaborately effaced its use values, as well as its wider ecological and social connections (Cronon 1996). Contemplative activities are accordingly portrayed as non-consumptive, and transcendent of more mundane concerns, such as environmental effects of the contemplator’s every day activities (Cronon 1996). or even of travelling to the nature that will be contemplated (Carrier and Macleod 2005). The production of nature film, and related conservation celebrity, contributed to a popular perception that such natures would disappear if not for the efforts of heroic conservationists (Bonner 1993; Brockington 2009; Lekan 2011). Finally, mass produced images and simulations of nature replaced uniquely contextualized qualities with iconic signifiers that could be transported to other locations and rearranged as desired (Wilson 1993). In this light nature for contemplation appears tailor made for scenarios of exchangeability and additionality, it also becomes the idea that local people will prosper more from nature’s exchange values than from its use values.

Considering these compatibilities, it is not surprising that nature for contemplation is consistent backdrop to the reified practices that Büscher (2011) calls “fictitious conservation,” as well as standing for its putative ends. Fictitious conservation, Büscher correctly notes, is indispensable to the valourization of nature as money for speculation, which he calls liquid nature. It is visually articulated – and made to circulate – by spectacular presentations of conservationists in action, often also incorporating narrative testimonies from conservationists themselves or celebrities speaking on their behalf (cf. Brockington 2009; Igoe 2013).

Nature for contemplation also figures in the calculative and technical reworkings of nature into money for speculation. The web page of TEEB (The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity) tells us,

<sup>8</sup> Alternative translation “indispensable embellishment,” <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord/>, July 26th 2012.

“You cannot manage, what you do not measure.”<sup>9</sup> Of course most people find it difficult to relate to abstract calculations and financial mechanisms, and nature for contemplation therefore remains essentially important. The TEEB page accordingly features a montage of endangered species, stock market trading screens, pristine landscapes, bar charts, and local people. A video promoting ARIES (Artificial Intelligence for Ecosystem Services) intersperses images of wildlife and satellite maps, with illustrated explanations of how the technology operates to calculate values of environmental assets.<sup>10</sup>

Visual mashups of nature for contemplation, fictitious conservation, satellite maps, graphs and charts are transforming nature for contemplation, through explicit, though selective, presentations of what has long been present, but previously hidden from view: “the application of techniques, procedures, and practices,” by which nature is brought forth as “an object of knowledge and target for regulation” (Bäckstrand, 2004:703; cf. Foucault 2007:79). Through the rapid proliferation of these kinds of mashups, even in popular presentations, nature for contemplation appears increasingly eco-functional, still beautiful and entertaining but no longer pristine and best left to its own devices. Eco-functional nature, as I call it, appears amenable to technological reorderings that will optimize economy and ecology, or at least accommodate putatively inevitable growth with minimal disruption to ecosystems and human well being.

Popular presentations of eco-function appears to operationalize cultural capitalism’s promise of consumption redeeming consumption (see footnote 3 above). Donations and purchases appear to initiate events resulting in the protection of animals and ecosystems (Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe 2008: Chapter 9; Igoe 2013). Texting “tree” to a designated number helps to make a shimmering virtual forest grow on jumbotrons in Times Square, metaphorically standing for actual forests being planted in Kenya and

Mexico.<sup>11</sup> Those who want more detail of how such arrangements work can track virtual polar bears, follow the blogs of African conservationists, or watch videos outlining the logic of interventions they are helping to support (Igoe 2013).<sup>12</sup>

Eco-function also informs more general commentary on the environment in popular media. A recent special edition of *Time Magazine* (March 12, 2012), for instance, showcases a top 10 list of “ideas that are changing your life” – number nine: “Nature is Over.” The corresponding article (Walsh 2012) explains that we are living in what atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen calls the *Anthropocene*, a geological epoch in which human activity has become an irreducible element of the biological, chemical, and geological processes of our planet. “It is no longer us against nature,” Crutzen opines, “instead it is we who decide what nature is and what it will be (84).” This, the article continues, will revolve around technological interventions and their acceptable trade-offs. With genetically modified seeds we will grow more food on less land, freeing up space for wildlife. We will also “learn to live” with nuclear power’s “risk of accident (85).” Finally we may have to “fiddle with the climate,” using “planetary scale technology (85).”

While such scenarios are scary, they are made to seem less so by more whimsical interactions with eco-function and language that lionizes the power of expert knowledge, while softening the potential dangers of the transformations experts will oversee. While optimal eco-function is almost certainly unachievable, in spectacle it can be conjured as a *fait accompli*. Spectacle’s ability to project unity and consensus where none actually exists (Debord 1998:2) makes it a powerful “technology of government” (cf. MacDonald 2010). It provides visual articulations of nature as an eco-functional object of intervention, while concealing and marginalizing alternatives and opposition to its seemingly monolithic vision. We now turn to the relationship of spectacle to what I call the micro-political milieu of commodity nature.

9 TEEB is a global initiative, and an evolving array of calculative technologies, dedicated to saving nature through its systematic valuation <http://www.teebweb.org/HomeofTEEB/tabid/924/Default.aspx>, July 26th 2012.

10 ARIES is a web-based technology offered to users world wide to assist in rapid ecosystem service assessment and valuation, <http://www.ariesonline.org/about/intro.html>, accessed July 26th 2012.

11 <http://3blmedia.com/theCSRfeed/Earth-Day-2011-Celebrations-Times-Square-ReGreen-World>, accessed July 27th 2012.

12 See especially: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwEwBdAM6U&feature=endscreen>, accessed July 27th 2012; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACHqdkfmP4Q>, accessed July 27th 2012; and <https://www.arctichome.com/web/index.html>, accessed July 27th 2012.

## The Micro-Political Milieus of Commodity Nature

Spectacular celebrations of fictitious conservation and financialized nature conceal a much more contested politics of what nature is and what it will be. Missing are western conservationists who believe in their bones that capitalism and profit motive spell nature's demise and not its salvation (see especially Ehrenfeld 2009). We will also never see the occasional tourist who looks beyond the spectacle they have been shown to gain a more nuanced understanding of nature conservation in specific locales, some of whom even go to the trouble to educate others by disseminating what they have learned.<sup>13</sup> Also absent are the resistances and critiques of the diverse rural people whose lives, livelihoods, and ontologies of more-than-human reality have been discounted and displaced by conservation (see Dowie 2009; regarding ontologies see Sullivan 2009).

In stark contrast to earlier green Marxist predictions that a looming environmental crisis would catalyze mass social movements demanding ecologically sane alternatives to capitalism (esp. O'Connor 1988), the struggles of these actors are decentered and seemingly disconnected. My theoretical framing of these struggles draws from the productive intersection of Marxian concerns with the subsumption of culture by capital and Foucauldian scholarship on techniques of government. The conditions described in the previous sections reveal not only what Nealon (2008:84) describes as the recirculation of value at all points on the socius, but also at diverse points of interaction between humans and more-than-human nature around the world. Furthermore, as Read (2003:126) has argued, the spread of commodity relationships from concentrated sites of production has required a concomitant spread of techniques and technologies designed to produce appropriate subjectivities. Nature on the move, which is produced and supported by these dispersions, presents a difficult moving target for activists and social movements, shifting and changing at different scales and locales.

This situation reflects two broader historical transformations that I have already touched upon.

The first began when the 19th century crisis of capitalist overproduction prompted the creation of a marketing industry to channel human desire into an apparently unlimited demand for consumer goods and services (cf. Debord 1998: thesis 45). The second began with the late 20th century proliferations of fictitious capital, "without any material basis in commodities or productive activity" (Harvey 2006:95), of which reified nature for speculation is a most recent expression. Taken together, as they frequently are, these processes have spawned a gigantic intellectual labour force, tasked with creating, celebrating, authenticating, and valourizing the latest consumer commodities and financial products. And of course there is the labour of consumption, which includes interpreting – and ideally taking appropriate action upon – a continuous bombardment of commodity signs: brands, slogans, and associations between desired experiences/qualities and designated products/services (Goldman 1994).

All of this "immaterial labor," according to Read (2003:129-130), both targets and shapes social communication and social space. It travels through "epistemic, aesthetic, and affective models that structure social communication." These, according to Virno (1996:23) include information systems, epistemological paradigms, and images of the world" and are communicated through manuals and reports, videos, seminars, and workshops. They are thus stored in archives, but also in the "minds of workers, as little productive machines (virtual fixed capital), without necessarily originating from them" (Read 2003:131). These valuable little machines are activated and reproduced in realms outside the direct control of capital: in the subjectivity of producer/consumers and the diversity of social spaces they inhabit.

In *Foucault Beyond Foucault* (2008), Nealon describes how mutations in modes of production from factory to cultural life corresponds to similar mutations in modes of power. My understanding of these mutations is informed by Foucault's (1983:220) basic definition of government as the "conduct of conduct," achieved by "structuring the possible field of action of others ... it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult." Government is inseparable from regimes of truth (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983),

<sup>13</sup> See especially *View from the Termite Mound*, by Susanna Nordlund, <http://termitemoundview.blogspot.com/>, accessed July 27th 2012.

producing objects of knowledge and intervention (e.g. conservation as a regime of truth that produces nature). It is concerned with shaping people's subjective perceptions of what is possible, plausible, and desirable, and thus of their own efficacy in any situation – for the purpose of “developing, canalizing, and harnessing social and individual capacities on a ... cost effective mass scale” (Nealon 2008:27).

Over time, Nealon (2008:31) argues, techniques and technologies of government have become more efficient, as they have been made lighter and more virtual. Discipline, for instance, works in a retail fashion on individual bodies in specific institutional contexts through a “series of discontinuous institutional training exercises” (41). Subsequent modes of biopower do not replace discipline, but infiltrates it and amplifies its effect by working throughout populations and “infuses each individual at a nearly ubiquitous number of actual and virtual sites.” It works less on actual bodies and more on potential actions, thereby “gaining an intensified hold on what (bodies) are, will be, may be” (31). Along these lines Foucault (2008:71) posited that neoliberalism is a new “art of government ... which will systematically act on an environment and modify its variables.” The point is to channel the acts of individuals, presumably acting in their own best interests, toward a spectrum of preferred outcomes and effects (Fletcher 2010).

What forms might “environmental governmental-ity” take with respect to the politics with which we are currently concerned? The politics of commodity nature, I believe, occur for the most part in modified environments that greatly resemble Foucault's (2007:20–21) discussion of milieu: a “multi-valent and transformable framework” ... fabricated from ... “pre-existing material givens,” designed to “maximize the positive elements ... [while] minimizing what is risky and inconvenient” (these of course are defined for the most part by planners, politicians, and other powerful actors). “It is what is needed to account for the action of one body on another at a distance.” “What one tries to reach through this milieu is precisely the conjunction of a series of events produced by [people] and quasi natural events which occur around them.” While his discussion is derived from town planning in 18th century Europe, the dynamics

he describes are visible, intensified, and refined in the micro-political milieus of commodified nature.

The first of these is a consumer milieu, consisting of the kinds of spectacle-dominated environments described in the previous section of this essay. In this milieu the action of one body (a consumer) can appear to initiate a chain of events positively affecting another body at a distance (e.g. a polar bear or a tree). Its recent explosion of web 2.0 applications marry self-expression (sharing your favourite causes) to wholesale monitoring and delineation of consumer types (people who care about the same causes as you also love “Endangered Species Chocolate!”).<sup>14</sup> While micro-politics of commodity nature occupy a tiny segment of this milieu, its presentations of conservation and nature are dominated by celebrity, consumerism, and depoliticized presentations of fictitious conservation (Igoe 2010; Igoe 2013). While possible to find virtual communities and media that are critical of commodity nature, they are few and their connections to efficacious action are undeveloped.<sup>15</sup> This remains for the most part a spectator milieu.

Next we have a transnational institutional milieu that corresponds to what MacDonald (2010) calls “the new fields of conservation.” This is the policy environment in which the creation and valourization of new forms of nature for speculation takes place. It is also a realm in which immaterial labour takes the form of “little productive machines,” like TEEB and ARIES as described above, and many other formulas,

14 The Facebook page of Endangered Species Chocolate currently features a photograph of four lions cubs. Clicking on this takes you to a comment from a “friend,” who states, “I officially want to adopt the four babies pictured here ♥♥♥♥ I know it's not reasonable, but they're just so stinkin cute!!!!” The company responds, “We know the feeling! You can symbolically adopt them through African Wildlife Foundation.” See: <http://www.facebook.com/EndangeredSpeciesChocolate>, accessed July 27th 2012. And: <https://www.chocolatebar.com/categories.php?category=Gift-Collections%2FAWF-Adoption-Collections>, accessed July 27th, 2012.

15 For an example of a critical virtual community, see the facebook page of Just Conservation, <http://www.facebook.com/JustConservation>, accessed July 15th 2012. For critical media see, the Silence of the Pandas; What the WWF Isn't Saying, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YSztqfLT3F0>, accessed July 14th, 2012. Conservation's Dirty Secrets, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTVELt-pdGc>, accessed July 14th 2012. A Place Without People, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrEmUjNhwyo>, accessed July 14th, 2012. BBC's Unnatural Histories, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b011wd41>, accessed July 14th, 2012.

models, and matrixes disseminated through interactive displays, expert presentations, promotional literature, videos, seminars, workshops and the like. Earlier in the millennium this milieu was more prone to conflict and contestation. The 2003 World Parks Congress in Durban, for instance, was disrupted by protests from indigenous peoples (Brosius 2004; Brockington and Igoe 2006). Similar disruptions have been reduced at subsequent events through a variety of management techniques designed to minimize interactions between attendees likely to have strong disagreements (MacDonald 2010). They also entail orchestrated performances of community consensus, miniature concentrated spectacles hailing appropriate subjectivities in their intended audiences (MacDonald 2010). This milieu, itself accessible to only a limited range of actors, is segregated into exclusive events within events, accessible to only the most powerful and privileged actors of all.

Finally we have the landscapes and seascapes that are sites to conservation interventions, and the source of nature spectacle circulating for contemplation and speculation in the milieus outlined above (cf. Igoe 2010). The modification of these milieu increasingly turns on complex and multi-faceted arrangements between NGOs, states, corporations, and local people, operating through “the restructuring of rules and authority over the access, use, and management of resources, in related labor relations, and in human-ecological relationships” (Fairhead et al. 2012:239). While these include **voluntary relocation** guidelines, they also often involve arrangements in which choices for relocation and/or livelihood transformations appear preferable to contending with the risks that the interventions themselves present for existing settlements and livelihoods (cf. Schmidt-Soltau and Brockington 2007). Resistances to such transformations are complexly intertwined with “local cultural politics, identities and material struggles” and frequently informed by complex assessments of the situations in questions. However, established presentations of local people as ‘green primitives,’ make it only too easy to reimagine these resistances as uninformed, “primitivist and hopelessly romantic” (Fairhead et al. 2012: 253).

## Concluding Remarks

The micro-political milieus that I have just finished sketching are currently subject of intense scholarly analysis, and important inroads are being made into understanding their internal dynamics, their interconnections, and their disconnections. I hope that in some small way the conceptual schema I have offered in this essay will prove useful to ongoing and future endeavours. If, however, “the point is to change it,” there remain a few things to say. It almost goes without saying that the stakes are very high by just about any standard. As Sullivan argues the third installation to this triptych, productions of nature for speculation are profoundly anti-ecological. Indeed she puts it more strongly than this: they are made possible by the systematic deadening of animate ecologies and non-capitalist human ontologies. Nor is it likely that turning nature into a giant bundle of capital assets will automatically result in the global spread of holistic stewardship practices. To quote Fairhead (et al. 2012:244):

Logic might suggest that this would inevitably value ecosystems over and above the sum of its parts. And yet that is what employees often think of viable businesses they work for when they are sold – before they are asset-stripped. The perversities of the financialized world are legion, and once there are markets for nature’s assets, so nature’s assets can be stripped.

Debord (2008:81) perhaps put it most succinctly with his assertion that capitalism was creating “a sick planet,” rendered palatable and seemingly inevitable by media spectacle, as “the environment and backdrop” of its own pathological growth and reproduction. As evidence for this undesirable outcome mounts, I increasingly hear conservationists lament that they did not know what they were helping to make when they embarked on the financialization of nature – a sentiment that resonates with Foucault’s (1965) observation that: “people know what they do; they often know why they do what they do; what they don’t know is what they do does.”

Of course it is doubly difficult to know what we do does from inside a spectacle saturate milieu. As Agamben (1993) notes in his comments on Debord’s

legacy, spectacle is “the appropriation of language itself, the very communicative nature of humans.” As such, Read (2003:151) elaborates, “it is the simultaneous site of site of mystification and struggle.” Spectacle, as a technique and symptom of power, works to appropriate the diversity and commonality of human communication and experience, presenting it as an apparently unassailable singularity. Spectacle’s meta-message, Debord (1995: thesis 12) believed, is “everything that appears is good; everything that is good will appear.”

As both Debord and Foucault urged, each in his own way, we denizens of post-industrial consumer society have a lot of work to do on our subjective experiences of, and by extension engagements with, “the intense singularity that is the present” (to borrow a phrase from Nealon 2008:106). More expansively, struggles in the micro-politics of commodity nature are animated by, and productive of transformative knowledges and practices that need to be taken more seriously. To quote Foucault once more: “it is possible that (in) the struggles now underway, the local, the regional, (and we can add the transnational), discontinuous theories being elaborated in the course of these struggles, and which are absolutely of a piece with them, are just beginning to discover the ways in which power is exercised” (in Deleuze 2004:212). As West (2006:66) aptly notes, for instance, we have not begun to understand the creative and diverse ways that people around the world engage and critique capitalism, and by extension capitalist natures. These in turn point to possibilities beyond oppositional critique, taken up by Sullivan in the following essay: “enlivening both nonhuman natures and understandings of what it means to be human in intimate and maintaining relationships with other-than-human worlds.”

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