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Invisible Culture

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Introduction: Nature Loving

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In the opening sequences of Luc Jacquet's recent film for National Geographic, *March of The Penguins* (2005), audiences are shown spectacular vistas of a barren Antarctic landscape. The ice-covered backgrounds are punctuated by tiny, black figures waddling across the horizon. The warm and knowing narration of Morgan Freeman assures viewers that this promises to be "a love story." "In the harshest place on earth," he states, "love finds a way. This is the incredible true story of a family's journey to bring life into the world." What unfolds in the remaining 80 minutes is a nature documentary about the breeding habits of the Emperor Penguin, made legible through the conventional rhetoric of the modern, heterosexual family. Emerging from a throng of indistinguishable, and vaguely frightening, penguin bodies, are the affective bonds between prospective male and female mates, between attentive "fathers" and the eggs that are left to their care, and between traveling "mothers" and the adorable newborns to which they return. These visible intimacies demonstrate that nature, even at its most desolate, is a site in which love blooms. In *March of the*

Penguins, the penguins learn to love each other, and audiences in turn learn to love the penguins. Judging from the two screenings we witnessed (in Ottawa and Rochester), these lessons in love are warmly received; they inspire feelings of being in touch with something authentic and true, and the notion that our ethico-political compass is pointed in the right direction. As Freeman reiterates, the penguins are focused solely on the task of reproduction. There is no evidence of “biological exuberance” or a single queer bird to be found.

The tradition of culture studies tells us that *March of the Penguins* is not a new education. As Raymond Williams aptly remarked, “the idea of nature contains an extraordinary amount of human history” – so too, we submit, does the love of nature. ¹ Alexander Wilson locates this love in the effects of urban industrialization, arguing that it flourishes best in cultures with highly developed technologies, “for nature is the one place we can both indulge our dreams of mastery over the earth and seek some kind of contact with the origins of life – an experience we don’t usually allow urban settings to provide.” ² William Cronon reaches further back to an eighteenth-century European notion of the romantic sublime, and its nineteenth-century American companion, the Western frontier. These concepts, argues Cronon, have jointly idealized nature as “wilderness” and displaced aboriginal peoples. ³ Both Wilson and Cronan stress how nature loving constitutes a set of ideological narratives that have allowed for the production of capital and the inscription of white, middle-class values as universals.

But this approach of debunking or “denaturalizing” nature has left little room for the ambiguities to be found in the meanings and experiences of *loving* nature. This is one source of contention for Donna Haraway, who takes issue with what she sees as the reductive ways nature and the natural sciences have been treated not only in histories of science and popular culture, but also in critical theory. Haraway’s research is a testament to the fact that she is not against the project of unearthing the apparatus of ideology, but *is* opposed to how celebrations or condemnations of technology often gloss over the complexity of nature. What is clear from her account is the idea that although nature is thoroughly mediated, it is not a completely colonized or homogenous space. Rather than approaching nature, and the love of nature, as productions of a linear history, she is interested in both as matrices of discursive struggle. For Haraway, nature is a discursive struggle over bodies, specifically between the discourses of technoscience, feminist and anti-racists movements, popular culture and environmental threat in the twentieth-century. To address these diverse discourses Haraway deploys a series of monstrous metaphors, including cyborgs, astronautic apes, genetically engineered and patented mice, vampires, and coyote-tricksters. ⁴ These potent figures resituate the love of nature as an ever-changing bio-cultural text or, what Roland Barthes wonderfully calls, “a skein of different voices and multiple codes which are at once interwoven and unfinished.” ⁵

We also want to insist on nature’s multiplicity and its multiple effects, and to emphasize the difficulty of making definitive conclusions about the affective life of

nature, if only to make the claim that not all natures are loveable to all people in all ways. The five essays that make up this issue of *Invisible Culture* consider the various aesthetic and political conditions through which it becomes possible, desirable, or obligatory to get close to nature, in all its heterogeneity. While they also examine the political and philosophical implications of this proximity, they do so without undermining the joys of wading through the wonderful world of animals, plants and habitats. Indeed, the essays in this issue suggest some of the benefits of staying emotionally and physically connected to these natures, however culturally specific the connection proves to be. As a strategy of “situated-knowledge production,” to borrow Haraway’s term, staying connected can help us better understand, experience, and intervene into a history of power relations that continue to render nature as loveable. [6](#)

In the first essay, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands investigates nature loving from a queer perspective. Through a concise genealogy of sexuality and its relationship to ideas of nature, she fleshes out the heterosexism embedded within productions and practices of “wilderness.” For example, she argues that the evolutionary theory of the queer as a biological aberrant helped certain institutional discourses twin nature with heterosexuality, while relegating homosexuals to the realm of – and as markers of – “unhealthy” environments. Sandilands counters this traditional view by showing how histories of queers in rural and urban wilderness have worked to disrupt and strategically *re-naturalize* the place of same-sex love in nature. The queer nature-lover has, in effect, changed the material

landscapes of natural spaces and what ultimately counts as natural.

Melissa Aronczyk continues the thread of wilderness and its lovers. Sensitive to the incongruities that SUV advertising displays, between a wilderness worth protecting and a wilderness worth consuming, Aronczyk argues that commercial images of the SUV in nature give voice to an American wilderness ideal that is purposely contradictory. This ideal views the natural world as a space that is both external to the realm of human interaction but also central to the experience of being human. As Aronczyk points out, this inconsistency has been exploited not just to sell cars, but also as a way to construct the desires of middle-class Americans according to conflicting narratives of adventure, progress, comfort, and style. In pointing out the pitfalls of the American wilderness ideal, Aronczyk also takes on the narratives of environmentalism and conservation that were designed in response to it.

Matthew Roth sheds still more light on the love affair with American wilderness in his examination of three of Disney's celebrated films, *Pinocchio* (1938), *Bambi* (1942), and *The Lion King* (1994). Roth presents these three films as case studies in how the popular representation of wild nature has reflected and been driven by changes in the socio-economic policies of the United States. He argues that while there has certainly been many consistencies in the wonderful world of Disney, it has also struggled with conflicting philosophies and anxieties. As a series, the three films delineate the shifts in the cultural work that nature has been called on to perform. The Darwinism of *Pinocchio*, the Nietzsche-like

solitude of *Bambi*, and neo-conservatism of *The Lion King* have all demanded that nature and nature loving be refashioned.

Gary Genosko's essay also engages the animation of Walt Disney as one of several examples of the role cuteness plays in popular representations of nature. With an eye for the connections between popular culture and natural history, Genosko provides a much-needed formal analysis of cuteness. Referencing the ethology of Konrad Lorenz, Genosko explains how the physical qualities of cuteness can produce pleasurable physiological responses in its spectators and facilitate their desire to get close to animal and animal-like bodies. Turning to the postwar pages of *National Geographic Magazine*, Genosko demonstrates how cuteness infiltrated its presentation of nature. Central to Genosko's argument is the idea that cuteness has been used as way of domesticating nature, ensnaring animals, and thus providing a rich source of affection and control.

In the final essay, Matthew Brower continues the interrogation of animals as cultural artifacts and how they perform in one of the most naturalized technologies, wildlife photography. Critical of the persistent tendency to figure wildlife photography as a means of getting back to an unspoiled nature, Brower shows how looking at animals through this medium is necessarily a social practice that not only produces the changing social relations humans have had with animals but also the changing relations humans have had with nature as a whole. Using the example of two nineteenth-century animal images, the essay traces the ways that photographed animals can slip away from a purported

naturalism, revealing their constructedness and the temporal specificity of their viewers. Both the natures depicted and the feelings they evoke become artifacts of history.

As these essays show, our experiences of nature loving may well feel like the most natural thing in the world, and thus the most important and just. But, as they also show, the parameters of this adoration are subject to moments of crises and epistemic shifts. Again, we want to repeat the idea that because we see the forms that make up nature and nature loving as diverse and expansive, we see a need for a type of criticism that is likewise complex in its treatment of nature. And it is here that we situate this issue of *Invisible Culture*. Call it a labor of love.

1. Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London: Verso Books, 1980), p. 67. ↑
2. Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991), p. 25. ↑
3. William Cronan, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, edited by William Cronon (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996). ↑
4. Haraway foregrounds her methodology in a number of essays and is most explicit in a collected series of interviews done with Thyrza Nichol Goodeve entitled *How Like a Leaf* (New York: Routledge, 2000). ↑
5. Roland Barthes, "Textual Analysis of a Tale of Poe," *On Signs*, edited by Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 96. It should be pointed out that Barthes is not referring to nature in this essay, but is addressing how texts are constructed from the interplay of multiple codes. To add

to this claim he draws on the conceptual links or play between text and textiles. ↑

6. Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991). ↑

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