

What of Unnatural Bodies?:

Liminality and Choice in Lucía Puenzo's *XXY* and *El niño pez*

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The marginalization of certain bodies and practices relies on a discourse of nature that posits the unnatural, the abnormal, as an aberration that defies all sense of order and goodness. In such formulations of the natural, abnormal bodies and practices are subject to correction, to being brought into line with the logic of nature. Thus, notes Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands in her essay "Queering Ecocultural Studies," those who are excluded by the often heteronormative underpinning of this logic have "deployed a variety of discourses of nature as part of a strategy of resistance; a choice to 'naturalize' the queer through animal, genetic, literary, and even environmental arguments..." (459). This strategy does not oppose the normalizing tendency of discourses of nature, which are an integral part of medical, juridical, and ethical responses to gender and sexuality, but rather argues for inclusion within it. Consider Sharon Sytsma's decision in the introduction to *Ethics and Intersex* to take as a starting point that "intersexuality is *natural*" (xx). Here the state of being "natural," of being produced by nature, is made as a first claim in order to access the realm of truth and real existence, or the right to exist: if a body is natural, it is defensible in a way that unnatural bodies are not.

These various deployments of "nature" show that it is open to shift and politically driven; therefore eliciting the skepticism of queer theorists who question its normalizing potential and essentializing tendencies (Mortimer-Sandilands 459). One such theorist, Jeffrey Weeks, concludes that the ever-changing way that nature is understood provides questionable ground for the politics and ethics of sexuality (99). In spite of being problematic in this way, discourses of nature continue to shape the intelligibility of liminal bodies and sexualities. To focus this problematic, this essay analyzes discourses of nature in relation to the representation of liminal bodies and sexualities in two films by director Lucía Puenzo: *XXY*, based on the short story "Cinismo" by Sergio Bizzio and *El niño pez*, based on the novel by the same name and written by Puenzo. Borrowing Nikki Sullivan's use of the term "somatics"¹ to refer to the discourses that frame debates about bodily modifications and inform how we understand corporeality, I argue that in both films a discourse of naturalness functions as a "somatics," or a discourse that shapes the intelligibility of liminal bodies and sexualities (314). Framing these bodies

¹ A term coined by participants in two international conferences dealing with body modification at Macquarie University in Sydney Australia: *Body Modification: Changing Bodies, Changing Selves* in 2003 and *Body Modification Mark II* in 2005 (Sullivan and Murray 3).

and sexualities as natural contests a long history of treating them as though they were not, however, it does nothing to upset the legitimating function of nature that proceeds by excluding some bodies in favor of others. Following Susan Stryker and Nikki Sullivan's call for critical inquiry into such "legitimizing fictions" (61) and Judith Butler's interest in ascertaining the "normative conditions under which the materiality of the body is framed and formed" (*Bodies that Matter* 17), this essay aims to denaturalize the representation of nature in these films through an exploration of the conditions under which the body conforms to the norm of the natural.

XXY's emphasis on the ethical question of freedom of choice is complicated by the motif of nature versus culture. Despite reworking the natural/unnatural binary in favor of marginalized bodies and sexual practices, its rhetorical strategy reinforces the same morality based on natural goodness that led to the marginalizing practices it opposes, calling into question the compatibility of an ethics of choice with the legitimating fiction of nature. Rather than arguing in favor of any choice that characters might make in regard to their bodies and sexualities, *XXY* ultimately prioritizes nature over agency: the right choice is the natural choice. In *El niño pez*, however, the characters' engagement of discourses of nature through the construction of their own narrative of the natural indicates that the morality of nature is itself held in place by fiction.

The question of agency appears within the frame of nature from the start of *XXY*, a film about an intersex child named Alex, played by Inés Efron, who is raised as a girl by her parents. The ominous image of the sharp blade of a machete dangling next to the feet of two children walking through the woods appears during the opening credits. A shot of Alex and her friend Roberta running through the trees, crosscut with an underwater scene of gurgling and quivering exotic sea life, depicts the children as creatures in their natural habitat. Roberta's budding breasts and long hair dappled with sunlight are visual markers of femininity that contrast with the contour of Alex's shoulder blades and shadowed face. Just after we see Alex bring up the machete and heave it down against the ground, a graphic image of the sex chromosomes XXY comes into focus. The serrated edge of the male "Y" chromosome in the image suggests that it was produced by cutting off part of an "X" chromosome. This sequence of images alludes to Alex's simultaneous connection and discomfort with the male component of her intersexuality and prefigures her struggle to accept it and defend it against the suggestion that s/he is unnatural.

As a child, Alex's ability to determine whether or not and how her body may be treated is subject to the power of adults, primarily her parents. Although they have decided to forego sex assignment surgery until s/he is older and/or they deem that Alex is mature enough to make her own choice in the matter,² they agree to suppress her virilization through the use of corticoids. Tension arises when Alex decides to stop taking the corticoids and her mother, Suli, who has never been comfortable with Alex's liminal body, responds by inviting Ramiro, a surgeon specializing in the correction of physical abnormalities, his wife, Erika, and their son, Álvaro, to their home. It is doubtful, however, that surgical alteration of Alex's body would resolve the questions surrounding

² Intersex advocates encourage this practice of assigning a gender to an intersex child until s/he is able to choose his or her own gender "thoughtfully" (Ozar 17).

her sex identity. As David Hester notes, “Liminality is not erased by this intervention [surgical or hormonal], but is reinforced through a pathology of medical practices that renders the body of the intersexed unnatural and suspicious, even after intervention” (48).

The question of Alex’s agency is played out through the opposition between her body as natural and the scientific view that her body fails to comply with the natural male/female binary. This opposition is reflected in the different environs of each family and the professions of each respective father. Ramiro and his family live in the metropolis of Buenos Aires where he is a surgeon who alters physical “defects” in order to bring bodies into line with the normative course of nature. The film’s constant depiction of Alex’s body as already part of nature contests the view that her body is somehow alien to it. The blue tones of the film reinforce the presence of the sea and are reflected in the color of Alex’s large eyes. A scene of Alex in her room shows her asleep in her bed with the expanse of the sea reaching into the distance from the sand color stretches of her smooth back. She is at home in nature, and nature is in her, from the lizard that crawls up her leg as though she were part of its terrain to the feather she uses as a bookmark. Upon waking, Alex places one of her corticoid pills on her chest and flicks it off with her fingers, rejecting scientific intervention in her body. Later when Alex is very upset and starts to cry, a torrential rain begins to fall.

Kraken, Alex’s father, and his family left Buenos Aires to move to a coastal fishing town in Uruguay where they might live farther away from the pressure to “correct” Alex, closer to nature. Kraken, the name of a large sea creature of folklore, is a marine biologist who studies and observes nature with a special interest in protecting endangered sea turtles. The negative portrayal of Ramiro in contrast with the positive portrayal of Kraken (one cares about his child’s right to choose what happens to her and the other hopes his son isn’t a homosexual) echoes the film’s argument that science and technology can either wrongly intervene in nature or rightly maintain distance while describing and protecting it.

The motif of cutting related across several non-sequential scenes further delineates between the two different depictions of science and nature that Kraken and Ramiro represent. Like the symbolic cutting mentioned earlier that Alex performs as the agent of her intersex body, additional representations of cutting in the film are also tied to sex identity. They differ from the film’s initial image of cutting, however, in so far as they are carried out by adults and associated with the identification or construction of the female sex. A close-up of a sea turtle’s shell being cut off during an autopsy introduces us to Kraken who utters the first audible word of the film, “hembra” [female]. In spite of their differences, both of these first representations of cutting function as descriptions, rather than alterations, of biological sex. They stand in contrast to acts of cutting performed by those characters who are most clearly interested in surgically altering Alex’s body; in one scene Ramiro cuts meat and in another Alex’s mother cuts a carrot and begins to bleed when she accidentally cuts herself. Indeed, as Tamsin Whitehead observes, the film’s reference to the possibility of Alex being castrated is “somewhat heavy-handed.” In addition to science, the film also depicts industry as an aspect of civilization that can have a harmful relation to nature. The town where Alex lives is heavily dependent on the fishing industry and fishing procedures sometimes maim sea turtles. Accompanying her

father to work one day, Alex observes a sea turtle whose fin has been cut as a result of this industry and remarks to Ramiro's son Álvaro that it will not go back to sea. The implication is that if s/he too is cut, a return to her natural state/setting will not be possible. The identity tag for a turtle used to track its migratory route becomes a symbol for Alex's desire not to lose her original and natural home, her integral body. As their attraction to one another deepens, Alex offers Álvaro a tag for a turtle of the same family as the turtle whose tag s/he wears around her neck.

With a seemingly indeterminate body, difficult to categorize, Alex is a liminal creature like the endangered turtle that lives somewhere between "intelligible life" and extinction (Butler *Undoing Gender* 206). Álvaro's relationship with Alex is joined in this liminality, and the two characters', both questioning their sexual identity, have their first conversation near the water's edge. The two characters are also liminal as teenagers, not small children and not yet adults. A shot/countershot of Alex's gaze from beneath of the floorboards of the porch to Álvaro's downward gaze, unites the two characters outside the straight lines of site that focus the adults around them and situates Alex in the traditionally male position of the cinematic gaze. The film's representation of an idealized natural realm where liminality belongs and need not be resolved contests the reduction of certain types of variance in medical and juridical discourse to the abnormal and unnatural. When Alex sees Álvaro sketching an insect, what he refers to as "un bicho raro" observing and recording its oddity, perhaps later able to classify it, Alex angrily smashes it saying, "¿Qué sabes vos de las especies de mi casa?". For Alex, there is a dangerous line between categorization and elimination. This line is dramatized in a scene in which boys from the town catch Alex alone at the water's edge, pin her down, and pull down her shorts in order to view her sex. In the previous scene, the empty shells of the violated bodies of sea turtles are also featured on the shore, the work of local fisherman who are angry with Kraken for his attempts to protect sea turtles and impinging on their industry in the process. Again cutting, delineation, and surgery are linked together as forces that exist outside of nature and threaten it.

When Kraken accidentally happens upon Alex penetrating Álvaro, he becomes more suspect than ever of his wife's desire for Alex to stay on corticoids and become a girl. He visits a man named Juan that he had heard of in the press who had undergone a sex change. When Kraken asks Juan if he had always known that he was not a woman, Juan says that he still asks himself what his life would have been like if they hadn't operated on him. Surgery is again depicted as an affront to nature when Juan says that the series of operations that he was made to undergo as a child were castrations not operations.

The most striking difference between *XXY* and the short story "Cinismo" upon which it is based, is the absence of the question of surgical modification and acts of cutting in the later. In fact, "Cinismo" lacks a surgeon and Álvaro's father, Muhabid Jasan, instead composes musical scores for film. In spite of this drastic change, the character of Álvaro's father remains largely the same when we consider his relation to nature. With his "tough" and "insensitive" character and ability to drive his career by "application" and "technique" rather than talent, Muhabid's relation to nature is distinctly more distant than that of the other principal characters of the story (14 translations are mine). Both Kraken and Alex, named Rocío [Dew] in the short story, are tied to nature through their names;

as a homeopath, Suli believes in the healing power of natural remedies; Érika, Muhabid's wife, likes botany and goes into the forest to paint; and Álvaro is perhaps more united to nature than to people: "[E]ra capaz de hacerte caer desde lo alto de un puente por alzar un brazo hacia la puesta de sol" (7). Muhabid's reaction to a bug that he finds on his neck illustrates that he does not appreciate nature, especially those aspects of it that he considers purposeless: "Era un bichito redondo, con ojos amarillos delineados en negro, un bichito obeso, inofensivo, atónito, que hacía pensar en lo inservible, en algo ajeno al ecosistema o por fuera de él. Muhabid notó que la naturaleza había provisto al insecto de una dura coraza roja para que tuviera al menos una chance de mantener a salvo su inutilidad. ¿Por qué era tan ignorante la naturaleza?" (14). He then proceeds to squash the bug with his sandal. For a career man driven by precision and pragmatism, the inutility of the bug –and in his estimation the inutility of his son's possible homosexuality, is maddening. Just as in the film, the various scenes in which Álvaro and Alex are related to the natural world counter this view of Álvaro's sexuality as unnatural.

In spite of their many differences, *XXY* and *El niño pez* are united in their production of liminal bodies and sexualities through the opposition of nature and culture. Inés Efron stars again, this time as Lala. When she is a young teenager, Lala's family takes on a Guarani housemaid by the name of Ailin, or la Guayi as she is commonly referred to, played by Mariela Vitale. The contrast between culture and nature beings with scenes of Lala leaving and la Guayi entering Lala's parents' home in Buenos Aires crosscut with, as in *XXY*, scenes of underwater sea life. La Guayi's close tie to nature and water is contrasted with the tensions of city life; As Lala notes, "Con la Guayi cerca la ciudad dejaba de ser hostil" (84). La Guayi and Lala, make plans to escape the class structure and divides of the home in which they met but cannot live as equals who love one another. They begin to save money and sell valuables from Lala's family home in hopes of buying their own home next to lake Ypoa in Paraguay where la Guayi used to live. In the meantime, they make a home for themselves in Buenos Aires, holding each other in the warm waters of a bath as la Guayi describes her love of nature and how as a girl she would walk by the shores of lake Ypoa, wanting to fit all that she found around the shore, the eggs, birds, and plants, all if it inside her. Water is also evoked in the title of the film, which refers to a myth about a child fish in Lake Ypoa that guides lost children to depths of the water.

In contrast to the welcoming water, Lala's family home is a space in which the romantic relationship between Lala and la Guayi is largely ignored, although known. This is especially clear when Lala's father has sex with la Guayi, brushing aside his daughter's feelings and the problematic power differential between himself and his maid. Lala's mother, depicted as disinterested in her husband and more interested in world travel, is not present in the home when Lala discovers her father having sex with la Guayi and decides to kill him with a poisoned glass of milk, the liquid of the absent maternal body and the drink that father and daughter shared, sweetened with sugar, when she was a child.

After fleeing the scene of the murder and going to Paraguay in hopes of meeting la Guayi there once the cost is clear, Lala discovers that la Guayi has been detained as a suspect in her father's murder. In scenes that splice the real with a possible dream

sequence, Lala sees the fish child in the lake. Later, Lala discovers that la Guayi's father impregnated her when she was young and left her alone to raise the child while he went in search of fame as an actor and singer. The natural world reflects the characters' affect, and in the novel when Lala cries for the first time in a long time upon hearing the news that la Guayi had a baby when she was a young girl, sure enough a heavy rain begins (48). After Lala hatches a plot to free la Guayi and the two are reunited, la Guayi tells Lala the truth behind the fiction of the fish child. Abandoned to birth her child on her own, la Guayi held her new born who did not appear to be breathing under water until she saw him take a breath, as if he were a fish. This liminal creature, the result of incest, living but barely breathing, was quickly interned to nature, to the depths of the lake where la Guayi imagined that he would live in peace as Lala and la Guayi hope to do.

The protagonists are again linked to nature through a dog named Serafín, whose name refers to the liminal creature of a cherub, an angel child. La Guayi finds the dog as a puppy that has been left to die, names him, and gives him as a gift to Lala. In the novel, Serafín becomes even more liminal in his role as the dog/narrator of the story. Lala and Serafín develop a deep bond, she gives him milk to drink, and later when he is injured Lala too is injured. When she arrives to la Guayi's childhood home, Lala finds plastic cherubs (evoking Serafín) on the front gate. Thus la Guayi's child is metaphorically linked by the image of the cherub to the dog that the two share.

That which the two lovers share, and that which pulls them apart, is coded in nature. In the novel, Lala goes to visit la Guayi in the institute where she is being held and la Guayi tells Lala to forget about her. Coded in terms of nature, this painful change in their relationship is registered in the changing colors of the earth during an eclipse. Speaking of Lala in that moment, Serafín remarks, "...no quería explicaciones científicas; era natural que a partir de ese día, los colores de la tierra cambiaran" (104).

Although both *XXY* and *El niño pez* are successful in reinscribing liminal bodies and sexualities within natural discourse, I take this opportunity to critically analyze the implications of this inscription. Culture does influence nature, although heteronormativity would hold otherwise, would hold that it is not culture that excludes the liminal or queer from nature, but nature itself. To make queer subjectivity intelligible in the opposition of nature to culture maintains the false idea that they exist independent of one another. Thus I ask of this framework of the natural, what of unnatural bodies? What of bodies that cannot, or do not wish to, conform to the logic of nature, neither through science nor the visual craft of a film director. What beliefs in the integrity of the body are sustained in this discourse and which bodies are excluded as a result?

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