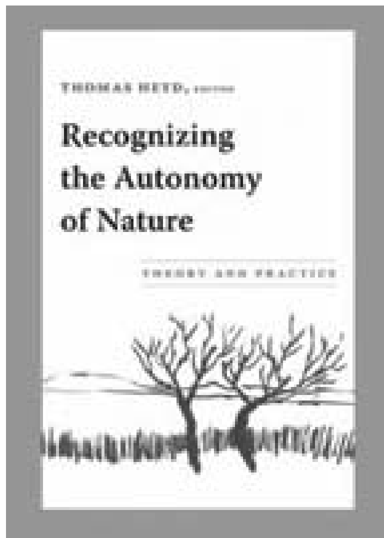

Recognizing the Autonomy of Nature: Theory and Practice, Thomas Heyd, ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. 230 pp. ISBN 0 231 136606 4.

Reviewed by Cheryl Lousely

The deep ecology versus social ecology versus ecofeminism debates of the 1980s resurface in this slim collection of environmental philosophy. In this round, the deep ecology position stakes its ground under the label "autonomy of nature" and pits itself against postmodern social constructionists. But once again, despite the inclusion of an incisive essay by Val Plumwood, feminist arguments and considerations are largely disregarded by the other authors—to the detriment of the whole exercise.

Recognizing the Autonomy of Nature is a conversation in print that began with a conference held in Newfoundland in 1997. Several of the essays have been published in similar form elsewhere, but the book does more than gather together a set of essays. The book sets out to describe and debate the validity and usefulness of the concept of nature's autonomy for environmental ethics and practice, especially ecological restoration.

In his introduction, Thomas Heyd defines autonomy as "the capacity for ruling one's self" (5) and applies this humanist conception to nature by extrapolating its sense of a unified subject to other entities that appear to maintain their structure or integrity over time. Keekok Lee adds the notion of "self-generating," or coming into existence without human action or influence (54). A plant, for example, need not be conceived in terms of having a conscious or reasoning "self" to be understood as emerging and existing independently of humans. Both philosophers disregard the psychoanalytic literature that questions the unity of the human subject to argue that recognition of self-generation and self-maintenance will allow nonhuman entities to be given ethical consideration.

Following these introductory definitions, the remaining essays largely accept the premise that "nature" must be recognized as "autonomous" and debate the extent to which recognizing autonomy requires humans to adopt a hands-off approach. The responses range from Eric Katz's absolute non-interventionist stance to William Throop and Beth Vickers's cautious embrace of community-focused agriculture, to Andrew Light's and Mark Woods's slightly different arguments for ecological restoration as a well-intentioned best effort for a non-dominating interaction with nature.

The exceptions are the essay by Val Plumwood and the concluding response by William Jordan III, both of which raise concerns about overemphasizing autonomy and neglecting dependency, interrelationship, and fluidity over time and across space. For Plumwood, the question of how our physical landscapes have been shaped by humans (i.e. what others call the loss of nature's autonomy) is only one part of the picture. Working from a feminist standpoint, Plumwood argues that there is also the issue of "backgrounding," whereby insufficient recognition is given to the work of women, people of colour, and manual labourers in producing what is often considered "nature" and to the role that ecological processes and nonhuman bodies play in seemingly "human" constructions. As Plumwood writes, "The idea that human life takes place in a self-enclosed, completely humanized space that is somehow independent of an inessential sphere of nature, which exists in a remote space 'somewhere else,' might be seen as the foundational delusion of the West" (44).

To argue for a notion of nature's autonomy that sets it aside as a remote space outside human influence (as several of the essays do) perpetuates this delusional premise. But unlike Donna Haraway, Plumwood is reticent to give up on the concept of nature, or its cultural legacy as a sign of difference or "unassimilated otherness" (49). Some recognition of the limits of the human (i.e. the autonomy of the nonhuman) is necessary to expose backgrounding. However, as several of the essays unwittingly reveal, recognizing nature as autonomous does not necessarily rectify the problem of backgrounding. Much like Haraway (I would argue), Plumwood suggests that it is in recognizing the agency of context-specific human and nonhuman actors that the delusions of the humanist subject are corrected.

The collection concludes with Jordan's essay, "Autonomy, Restoration, and the Law of Nature." Like Plumwood, Jordan insists on an understanding of autonomy that points to relationship with others. Jordan uses this embedded version of autonomy to make a strong argument against the stance of non-intervention, which he terms an illusory "disengagement" (194). Non-intervention relies on a notion of nature that is static (i.e. antievolutionary), fragmentary, and isolated (i.e. nonecological); neglects to account for how "nature" may re-engage "us" through acts such as forest fires; and, ultimately, offers an ethical dead-end or disengagement, which denies the value of understandings that emerge from physical and emotional engagement with the nonhuman. Jordan's chapter disappoints, however, in recommending a "studied indifference to human interests" be taken as the guiding principle for ecological restoration (202), thereby perpetuating the collection's overall indifference to social justice.