

Overcoming the Objectification of Nature in Constitutive Theories: Toward a Transhuman, Materialist Theory of Communication

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A wide range of contemporary theories of communication understand "reality" to be socially constituted by means of discourse. These constitutive theories have been adopted by many scholars because of the obvious political benefit: these theories directly refute claims about the "essential nature" of sexual, racial and other differences that are used to legitimize oppressive social systems. However, in emphasizing the influence of culture and discourse, constitutive theories often position the natural world as something that is passive and malleable in relation to human beings. I argue that communication scholars should closely examine the affiliations between constitutive theories and material attempts to order the earth, to bring it into line with idealist discourses such as logic and geometry. While the political benefits of constitutive theories should not be ignored, neither should their possible relationship to environmental violence. "Discourse" has become the foundation for a new regime of truth; I seek to decenter the humanism implicit in that regime. Developing theories of communication which account for human immersion in the natural world, while simultaneously avoiding determinism, requires conceptualizing a transhuman dialogue. This essay works to account for the power of discursive and natural forces by deconstructing the ideal/material distinction and allowing for the inclusion of nonessentialized, nonhuman voices.

A FEW YEARS AGO I watched a documentary about the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons factory (McLeod). I was struck, in a way I never quite had been before, about the insanity of it all. If too much plutonium or uranium is put together, if it achieves critical mass, immense devastation results. These substances are spread very thin, if they are found "naturally" at all. One microscopic particle of plutonium in the lungs can result in death. Yet hundreds of pounds of plutonium from Rocky Flats cannot be accounted for; hundreds of pounds more sit in the ventilation systems of its buildings. My response is simplistic, but

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how much thought does it take? "Nature" seems to be "saying" something. Put the obvious clues together: spread very thin, only one particle is needed to cause death, too much of it forced together explodes. The "message" seems clear: stay away from this substance and do not collect it in one place. However, so many do not listen. They are intent on subjugating nature, manipulating its parts and forces as if they are lifeless objects, in order to achieve control. We have become all too familiar with that narrative: objectification blocks dialogue. Ideologies of domination and manipulation, in effect, silence nature by dismissing the value of interaction based on nonhierarchical arrangements.

Susan Griffin argues that although

ecology is generally embraced as cause, no astonishing transformation in the way we think has occurred. Nor have the insights of theoretical physics, astrophysics or molecular biology, the new geometry of fractals, or the ideas of fuzzy logic reshaped the paradigmatic thinking of science as it is widely practiced in both science and society today. (*Eros* 40)

Griffin, for example, points out that Einstein's realization that energy and matter do not exist in opposition was used primarily not to transform our understanding but to make bombs. While there are alternative ideologies that challenge dominant paradigms, those discourses have not had the social force necessary to transform both ideology and material practice. Rocky Flats is not simply the residue of an earlier era, it is a continuing manifestation of objectifying paradigms. The deeply embedded sense, shared by both the religious idealism and mechanistic materialism of the West, that nature is simply the "dumb stuff of life . . . awaiting the destiny of human intelligence to mobilize and direct it toward a more perfect realization" (Griffin, *Eros* 36-37) continues to direct much of the thinking and, I believe, even more of the daily practice in Euro-North America.

Critical Turns

An awareness of how objectification and claims to objective knowledge have enabled the subjugation of nature, women, and other oppressed groups has led many communication scholars to embrace theories of discourse that emphasize the social and political nature of knowledge. Such "constitutive" theories of discourse have become a mainstay of communication studies (e.g., Berger and Luckman; Burke; Fiske; McGee; Mumby; Ono and Sloop; Wood—to name only a few and only part of the spectrum of views contained within my general label). These theories refute claims to objective knowledge about, among other things, the "nature" of women that are used to justify patriarchal social orders and thereby challenge the idea that any discourse is a neutral representation of the world. These predominant theories of discourse serve, on the one hand, as a response to the thrust of biological determinism, and on the other hand, as a source of hope. If "reality" is

socially constituted by means of symbol systems, more affirming and egalitarian systems of meaning can be constructed. No single social order is inevitable. As a response to claims of inevitability, the political importance of constitutive theories should not be underestimated (Cloud).

While the value of constitutive theories as a reaction against scientific and religious claims about gender, sexual, racial, and socioeconomic differences is not necessarily in doubt, I believe their value as a basis for theories of communication should be. To enact that doubt, I sketch a history of constitutive theories that problematizes their use as a primary foundation for "critical" (feminist, anti-racist, post-Marxist, liberatory) theories of communication, and I identify a possible alternative, one concerned not only with humanistic politics but with environmental politics as well. Constitutive theories follow idealism in treating the realm of the nonlinguistic (matter, nature, "reality") as inert and insignificant—in need of ordering via discourse. Closely affiliated with this understanding of the relationship between discourse and the world are forms of environmental and political practice that work to order nature—conceptually and materially—along the lines of an epistemological ideal traceable to Cartesian epistemology, Aristotelian logic, and Platonic idealism. In this essay I articulate an alternative imperative, one that values life, that works to listen to "nature," "matter," and "the feminine," and that approaches them as participants in a dialogue. That is, instead of subjugating the world with integers, atoms, and geometric forms, I believe we need to affirm what is nearest, what is ours: not "ideals" but *life*.¹

The idealism implicit in much communication theory and criticism has been identified, amended, and rejected by several critical scholars (e.g., Biesecker; Cloud; McGee; Sloop and Ono; Wander). While these materialist theories of discourse constitute both a significant challenge to and advance over the discipline's idealist roots, they do not go far enough. This essay simultaneously extends and challenges these materialist theories, building from their understandings of discourse as material practice while arguing that a materialism without a place for "nature" as an active (but not determinant) player runs counter to the desire to purge idealism and advance liberatory interests.

In dominant strains of Western thought, "the interdependency of human thought and the environment is a vast topic which has not been explored with anywhere near the same passion as the assertion of independence" (Griffin, *Eros* 86). Griffin cites the example of Enrico Fermi's bet about whether the Trinity explosion would consume the whole state of New Mexico. If it did, of course, his existence would come to an end. The wager was ludicrous but revealing, for it demonstrated Fermi's deep belief in the separation between humans and the material world. Griffin points out that the bet recalls Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, but in reverse: The observer not only affects the observed, but

the observed (nature) affects the observer (humans) as well. In this light, the incantation of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle by interpretive and critical theorists, perhaps in an effort to lend scientific legitimacy to their "soft" theories about the impossibility of objectivity, takes on new significance. We are very willing to talk about how discourse affects nature, but what about how nature affects discourse, and therefore, *us*? The importance of humans' material existence—our existence as both political *and* natural beings—is mystified when nature is positioned as passive or irrelevant in critical communication theory. As long as nature is objectified and the nature/human relationship constructed as one-way—active humans giving meaning and order to passive nature—the implications of a radically materialist and dialogic theory of communication will remain obscured.

To explain how I arrive at this point, I begin by demonstrating how constitutive theories of discourse participate in the larger idealist project of objectifying nature and denigrating the feminine. I then enter into dialogue with Nietzschean philosophy and ecological feminism to demonstrate the need to extend our conceptualization of discourse as a material practice and to understand that environmental destruction and reformation are not simply enabled by certain discourses but are themselves discursive. Finally, I argue that in order for critical, constitutive theories of communication to counter material oppression and environmental destruction, they must separate themselves from their Platonic heritage and allow for transformation by means of transhuman dialogue. This transformation, I explain, cannot occur simply by escaping from idealism into materialism, by privileging one side of that binary instead of the other; rather, this transformation requires recognizing the instability of the ideational/material binary itself. Understanding humans' immersion and participation in natural systems necessitates dismantling boundaries that exclude "nature"² from communicative and other social processes.

Constitutive Epistemologies and the Death of Nature

In a simplistic positivist epistemology, order exists in the world, is self-evident, and is available for discovery through observation. In Kantian epistemology the human mind becomes privileged, not as a passive receptor of the order in the world, but as an active, structuring process whereby knowledge of the world is constituted. In the Kantian world, humans are removed from direct contact with—or at least direct knowledge of—the world. Experience is mediated by structures intrinsic to the human mind. Kantian epistemology eventually gave rise to a variety of "constitutive" positions (structuralism, semiotics, dramatism) wherein the primary mediating structure became language. While this move relativized our knowledge of the world (since the structure and semantics of languages vary from culture to culture), it

retained two pillars of the Kantian relationship between knower and known: *separation* of humans from the world, and *privilege* of "correct" knowledge over the world. Following Nietzsche, I understand the prevailing goal of epistemology to be not description but command, an imperative about how we should know.³ Constitutive epistemologies do not simply name our separation and control of the natural world, they create, value, and call for such a relationship.

To take a representative if not necessarily typical example, Kenneth Burke's theory of language embodies this Kantian impulse. Burke is obsessed with transcendence and with language as the primary means for (an always imperfect) transcendence of the particularity of the world. This link between language and transcendence manifests itself in a number of different ways, but it can be encapsulated in Burke's analogy between language and spirit: "Words are to the non-verbal things they name as Spirit is to Matter" (*Rhetoric* 16). For example, he states that "an 'ideology' is like a spirit taking up its abode in a body: it makes that body hop around in certain ways . . ." (*Language* 6). To begin to make some of the implications more evident, he offers this formulation: "Where symbolic operations can influence bodily processes, the realm of the natural (in the sense of the less-than-verbal) is seen to be pervaded, or *inspired*, by the realm of the verbal, or symbolic" (*Rhetoric* 17). Notice the value structures here: nature, matter, and the body—all constructed by mainstream Western thought as "feminine" (C. Griffin; S. Griffin; Merchant; Schott)—are both *passive* and *less than*. Burke's model is deeply gendered.

This language/spirit analogy, in which language inspires (passive) matter, does not limit itself to humans as a site where the motion/action, animality/symbolicity, body/mind dualisms cohabitate. In Burke's essay "What Are the Signs of What?" this inspiring carries into the realm of physical objects and takes on a decidedly Platonic dynamic. He explains that words, by attributing a generalizable meaning to an object, transcend that object's specificity. He cites Plato's philosophy that the things of this world are imperfect exemplars of ideal forms, and, while admitting it is problematic, he values its usefulness as an analogy to the function of language. The word and its social meaning become the essence or form of which the concrete example is the manifestation. When we see an object, we inevitably see it through the screen of language, and hence what we "see" is the meaning. The object itself becomes the sign (it appears to "stand in" for the meaning), and the common sense relationship that "words are the signs of things" is therefore reversed. As Burke explains,

In mediating between the social realm and the realm of nonverbal nature, words communicate to things the spirit that the society imposes upon the words which have come to be the "names" for them. *The things are in effect the visible tangible material embodiments of the spirit that infuses them through the medium of words.* And in this sense, things become the signs of the genius that resides in words . . . for man, nature is

emblematic of the spirit imposed upon it by man's linguistic genius. (*Language* 362; emphasis added)

To begin to understand the gendered implications of this model, listen to John Fiske's elaboration of a similar position concerning discourse and its relationship to the nondiscursive world:

I believe that we have to theorize a "reality" with an extra-discursive or non-discursive existence while recognizing that such a theorized reality is inert, polymorphous and insignificant until put into discourse and thus made apprehensible and thus meaningful. The act of putting into discourse does not *describe* a non-discursive reality, it *produces* an apprehensible reality. ("*Writing*" 33)

The natural world is "inert, polymorphous and insignificant." This world plus discourse *produces* our *de facto* reality. Once again, I believe, objectification negates the possibility for dialogue. That which is quintessentially feminine in the dominant traditions of the Western world—call it nature, matter, physicality, body—has been rendered irrelevant. How does this irrelevancy come to be meaningful? For Burke, words "inspirit" or infuse the world with social meanings and the world becomes the embodiment of that spirit. The metaphor is not merely Platonic but *sexual*—that is, both gendered and reproductive.

Burke, Fiske, and constitutive theorists in general are, I believe, not only the direct descendants of an objectifying Kantian epistemology but of Aristotelian gender politics as well. Aristotle's amendments to Plato's idealism fuse form and matter, the active and passive, while still distinguishing between them and maintaining a hierarchical relation: the male, rational element must control the female, passionate, bodily, material elements—in social life, in the ethical life of the individual, and in reproduction (Schott). The male semen *inspirits*, provides the *form* for the female's contribution: matter. Seen in this light, Burke's and Fiske's language seems a uniquely masculine endeavor. Masculinity provides the soul—the spirit, the meaning—that molds (in-forms) matter. Language moves humans from the realm of motion (passive, controlled movement) to the realm of action (choice and ethics). As this link begins to make clear, these theories of discourse—so often appropriated by those, including myself, who desire liberation for oppressed groups such as women—are deeply affiliated with world views that have led to the desecration, destruction, and reformation of the environment.⁴ "nature," "matter," "the feminine."⁵ As feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway puts it,

It is this barely admissible recognition of the odd sorts of agents and actors which/whom we must admit to the narrative of collective life, including nature, that simultaneously, first, turns us decisively away from enlightenment-derived modern and postmodern premises about nature and culture . . . and, second, saves us from the deadly point of view of productionism. Productionism and its corollary, humanism, come down to the story line that "man makes everything, including himself, out of the world that can only be resource and potency to his project and active agency." This productionism is about man the tool-maker and -user, whose highest technical production is himself. (297)

Nihilism, Control, and Resistance

Nietzsche, in many ways the quintessential misogynist, opens *Beyond Good and Evil* with a fascinating question, one with which he does not follow through very productively, but which is nonetheless radical in its transformative potential: "Supposing truth is a woman—what then?" (2). What if the world does not conform to the masculinist assumptions of science and logic? What sense can we make of nature's resistance to Western epistemologies? What opportunities are offered?

Relying on the culturally constructed and commonly held association of nature with the feminine (e.g., "mother earth," female names for hurricanes, and Francis Bacon's belief that nature's secrets should be extracted from "her" like a witch on a rack [Merchant, *Death*]), French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray points to fluidity as a natural trait that defies the epistemological conventions of logic and science. She argues that the study of fluid mechanics has generally been approached with the methods and assumptions of the mechanics of solids. Once a fluid becomes turbulent, however, these methods and assumptions fail to predict and control the behavior of fluids:⁶

If we examine the properties of fluids, we note that this "real" may well include, and in large measure, a *physical reality* that continues to resist adequate symbolization and/or that signifies the powerlessness of logic to incorporate in its writing all the characteristic features of nature. And it has often been found necessary to *minimize certain of these features of nature, to envisage them, and it, only in light of an ideal status, so as to keep it / them from jamming the works of the theoretical machine.* (Irigaray 106–107; emphasis added)

Irigaray describes the conventional response when nature resists being captured by science: fluidity and turbulence must be controlled (put on Bacon's torture rack, as it were). If turbulence cannot be controlled, it must be obliterated—not only in any particular application but, as Irigaray points out, *in order to maintain the legitimacy of the conceptual model*. James Gleick discusses the literal, physical attempts at obliteration in terms of the demotion of fluid dynamics from physics to "mere engineering" and the latter's one-sided interest in making "the turbulence go away" (122). The will to knowledge, to domination, imposes its order onto the world. By transforming what exists into what is useful to us life is silenced.

Here we return to Nietzsche's question about the femininity of truth: What happens when life resists the imposition of a totality by the will to control? A belief in order, and hence value, is lost and we descend into nihilism:

Nihilism as a psychological state is reached . . . when one has posited a totality, a systematization, indeed any organization in all events, and underneath all events, and a soul that longs to admire and revere has wallowed in the idea of some supreme form of domination and administration. . . . Some sort of unity, some form of "monism": this faith suffices to give man a deep feeling of standing in the context of, and being dependent on, some whole that is infinitely superior to him, and he sees himself as a mode of the

deity. . . . At bottom, man has lost the faith in his own value when no infinitely valuable whole works through him; i.e., he conceived such a whole in order *to be able to believe in his own value*. (Nietzsche, *Will* 12)

Nietzsche distinguishes between the will to truth, which he sees as the dominant impulse in Western epistemology since Plato, and the will to power. The will to truth relies upon certain presuppositions; most importantly, it casts the world, objects, and truths as both singular and stable—as self-identical *beings*. Aristotle's principles form the basis for science and logic: A cannot be not-A; something cannot be affirmed and denied at the same time. The principles of identity and noncontradiction serve to stabilize the world, to fix it, to categorize it, to make it predictable. "Truth" is the will to be master over the multiplicity of sensations—to classify phenomena into definite categories" (Nietzsche, *Will* 280). Only by fixing objects, by insisting that they remain singular, discrete, and self-identical, can the syllogism hold its validity, can science predict, and therefore control, events. Our sensations—which often indicate that the world is multiple and ever-changing—must be denied. Our bodies can fool us and are therefore negated. Western epistemology and asceticism are deeply intertwined (Schott). Truth lies outside the body and the world, as in Platonic idealism.

The order of the will to truth is singular: one truth, one right way, one identity; uniform, regular, predictable: *being*. To maintain this "necessary illusion" of singularity, the multiplicities of nature, of life, must be silenced or brought within the frame of the will to truth and its order: thus, observation is turned into theory, becoming into being, multiplicity and flow into singularity and solidity, turbulence into a controlled and controllable regularity. There must only be (the) *One*. All else is excess and must in some way be eliminated.

The will to truth, Nietzsche argues, relies on the fundamental falsehood that the world is characterized by *being* instead of *becoming*. Knowledge, within the dominant Western epistemological frame, "is possible only on the basis of belief in being" (Nietzsche, *Will* 281). We make the world identical, coarse, and simple, and thereby comprehensible and calculable. We submit (it) to a totalizing discourse. Katherine Hayles identifies this submission in the context of turbulence:

The rhetoric that posits linearity as the norm, nonlinearity as a supplemental deviation, is pervasive in textbooks on fluid mechanics. B. S. Massey's comments in *Mechanics of Fluids* are typical:

Flow in pipes is usually turbulent and therefore highly complex. Random fluctuating components are superimposed on the main flow, and as these haphazard movements are unpredictable, no complete theory has yet been developed for the analysis of turbulent flow. . . .

The "main flow" has "superimposed" on it "random fluctuating components." These swerves from predictability are "haphazard movements" rather than dynamics intrinsic to the environment. What can be modeled is normal. What cannot is an aberration, a chance event, a superfluity. (21-22)

Turbulence resists the development of generalizations applicable to multiple contexts. Research must proceed by trial and error. "Even supercomputers are close to helpless in the face of irregular fluid motion," Gleick proclaims in apparent astonishment (123). Such resistance questions the totality. In the face of the risks of nihilism—the loss of the illusion of value, of truth, of order, of human superiority—the choice seems to be *to bring the world into / up to our ideal standards*, to make it conform so as not to question the validity of the ideal. This realization, this making-real of the ideal, points to the radical materiality of discourse, its ontological status, and the very real consequences for nature.

The warm, muddy, turbulent water of the Colorado River has become cold, blue-green and, in the enormous artificial reservoirs created by Hoover, Glen Canyon and other dams, calm. In combination with these dams, the natural contours of the land have been put to human use, to contain, channel, store, manage a resource. As a result, by an order of the Secretary of the Interior, the flow of the Colorado River can be turned off completely (Else).

In large agricultural areas, such as California's central valley, lakes and wetlands have been drained, rivers diverted, the land flattened. Row upon row of crops, extending mile after mile, are straight and uniformly spaced, ideally suited for mechanical treatment and harvesting. In other areas, long lines of sprinklers mounted on wheels create huge circles of green amidst a background of brown.

Explosives are used to tear apart soil and rock, to blast away at the unevenness, the inconvenient curves and mounds of the earth's surface. Huge earth movers continue the job of creating smoothly contoured or straight lines and surfaces for crops, homes, and roads. Canals run straight for miles. Large chunks are cut out of the tops of hills to lessen the vertical curves in enormous pipelines.⁷

The most fundamental tenet of geometry, the one learned so early, is unquestionable: The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Why would anyone think to make a pipeline other than straight? The straight pipeline *should* be efficient: it is the shortest it can be, thereby requiring less materials to make, less energy to pump the fluid it carries. At some point, however, the leveling of mountains may take too many resources, and the pipeline may be lengthened, diverted, required to go up and down or around. However, from the perspective of idealism these diversions from straight should be reduced as much as possible. "Natural" rivers are inefficient; they meander to such a great extent that they flow several times the length that would be necessary if they were straight. Without dams their waters could flow into the ocean, wasted. How can "nature" tolerate such inefficiencies? How can we?

In his discussion of turbulence, Gleick documents how the idealism of physics (what Irigaray refers to as the "logic of solids") led to the (dis)placement of fluid mechanics into engineering, a field mired in the complexities of the material world, a world in which efficiency is often "other" than the geometric ideal. The closer one gets to ontology, the more one is pushed to take ontology into account, to acknowledge the existing shapes of the terrain, the chaotic behavior of fluids, the limits of economic resources. The striving-to-be-straight pipeline—its physical traits, the mental and physical labor put into it, its power/knowledge formation (Foucault)—is an encapsulation of the idealist's will to control: geometry, efficiency, linearity, containment of flow, transportation of resources, the canalization of the earth, the imposition of a certain kind of order, the materialization of a certain philosophy, and *the inscription of that symbol system onto the earth* all manifest a dominating will. Yet the pipeline also contains the traces of an alternative, grounded practice in which efficiency is not only compromised but redefined in ontological terms. The recognition of existence and its complexities occurs in tandem with a humility regarding epistemological ideals. As geneticist Barbara McClintock put it, scientists must learn to "listen to the material" (quoted in Keller 162).

Geometry and Idealism

To extend the significance of the links between geometry and the ordering of the earth, let me return briefly to Plato's doctrine of idealism. Plato posited that the material world was a pale copy of ideal forms existing in another plane (notice the geometric metaphor; whether it's mine or Plato's is of less importance than how "natural" it seems). Knowledge was to be obtained not in the material world—that being a mere copy—but in the realm of ideas. The material world had little value. Knowledge came through the transcendence of our physical selves. Value, for Plato, lay *elsewhere*, in the realm of ideas.

Similarly, geometry posits certain *forms* that are not only defined in ideational terms but that *only exist in the realm of ideas*. For example, nowhere in the "natural" physical world is there a circle or sphere as geometry defines them: as a two or three dimensional shape whose exterior is equidistant from a central point.⁸ Objects which appear to be circular or spherical are, to borrow Plato's formulation, but pale copies of their ideal form—the earth, for example, is a somewhat squashed or "imperfect" sphere. The problem with idealism is that the world, our bodies, and our lives will never "measure up" to the perfection of the ideal forms ("geometry" means, literally, to measure the earth); the world's value will therefore always be *negated*. These ideal forms become *normative*—we try to mold our lives and our world into what we imagine those ideal forms to be.

Geometric forms have their status as human constructs (stories, fictions, metaphors) obscured, for they appear to be handed down from some supra-human force (usually Truth or God). In geometric forms Descartes felt he had found something of an absolute truth, a truth guaranteed by God's benevolence (a metaphor he [mis]took for reality):

I find within me countless ideas of things, that, although perhaps not existing anywhere outside me, still cannot be said to be nothing. Although I somehow think them at will, nevertheless I have not put them together; rather, they have their own true and immutable natures. For example, when I imagine a triangle, *although perhaps no such figure exists outside my thought anywhere in the world and never will*, still its nature, essence, or form is completely determined, unchangeable, and eternal. I did not produce it and it does not depend on my mind. (Descartes 329; emphasis added)

Idealism *creates and establishes* the ideals—the norms against which we are measured and toward which we strive—while claiming simply to *name* these ideals. These illusions do not merely stack up as “errors,” each constituting another step in the human journey toward truth. Instead, these metaphors become the basis for social, political, and economic actions, justifications and motivations to bring everything “into order.” Geometry and idealism are two manifestations of the same reifying will, a will that is hostile toward life.

Violence

We do not just order and organize, make the world fit our preconceptions, in our *cognitive* world. We are not nearly so passive or benign: we act out, toward, into the world, not just *on the basis* of these frameworks of sense-making, but *with* them. The infusing and ordering of the world through language as discussed by Nietzsche, Burke, and others is often understood either metaphorically or as occurring in the symbolic/mental/ideational realm as opposed to the material. I would argue, however, that idealism is directly connected with our very literal, physical attempts to order the earth, matter, bodies. How can the philosophy, the discourse, and the actions they author(ize) be distinguished? Geometrism and linearity are symbolic constructs *and* material practices. We do not just classify objects in books, we distribute bodies (in institutions and with architecture and urban design): we place animals in zoos, we designate “wilderness areas,” “wildlife preserves,” areas for “multiple use.” We build dams, blow up mountains, cut straight lines through and across the earth, carve up geography with geometric shapes using roads, canals, rails, pipelines, power lines, walls of sand, rock, and cement.

The dual and inseparable nature of these actions—discursive and material—was made explicit in a speech by Lady Bird Johnson at Glen Canyon dam: “This is a new kind of writing on the wall, a kind that says, proudly and beautifully, ‘man was here’ ” (Else). Burke explains that

nature, as perceived by the word-using animal, would be not just the less-than-verbal thing that we usually take it to be. Rather, as so conceived and perceived, it would be infused with the spirit of words, and of the social orders that are implicit in any complex verbal structure. (*Language* 378–379)

This infusion is not simply spiritual and/or symbolic; it is also material. I am talking about material actions, about the *intermingling of different kinds of forces*: physical, social, philosophical, discursive, biological, chemical, spiritual. The social orders have been inscribed onto the face of the earth, into its atmospheric layers, into its surrounding space; the earth itself can be read as a social text. In satellite photos, cities look frighteningly like computer chips (Reggio); people are transformed into “bits” of information. Pipelines, roads, and agricultural fields are geometry put into practice on a worldwide scale. The social and the natural, the mind and the body, humans and animals, animals and plants, organic and inorganic: such distinctions (fictions) are unimportant here. The project Nietzsche names is *the transformation of becoming into being*. To study the dominant forms of Western organization (order, epistemology, knowledge, social life, economics) is to study the transformation of multiplicity into singularity, fluidity into solidity, “chaos” into “order.”

These transformations result in a struggle between what we call the epistemological and ontological realms (the realms of knowledge and of life). Ontology has been subordinated to epistemology—to the will to control, ego, being, sense, language, mankind. Considering ontology as a conversational partner and the relationship between the ideational and the material as a dialogue—a relationship that has been hostile, hierarchical, confrontational—is radical, gives “the real”/“woman”/“nature” a voice of sorts. As Irigaray explains:

What is in excess with respect to form—for example, the feminine sex—is necessarily rejected as beneath or beyond the system currently in force. . . .

And yet that woman-thing speaks. But not “like,” not “the same,” not “identical with itself” nor to any x, etc. Not a “subject,” unless transformed by phallogocritism. It speaks “fluid,” even in the paralytic undersides of that economy. . . .

Yet one must know how to listen otherwise than in good form(s) to hear what it says. (110–111)

Simply trying to hear ontology—to listen to life—has become a radical deviation. This deviation is Nietzsche’s will to power, the affirmation of existence. *We need to learn how to listen in the “wrong” ways*. Our survival depends on it.

My central argument is that this refusal to listen to ontology and to engage epistemology in a dialogue with ontology is not simply a Platonic, Cartesian, or positivist “sin,” but one shared by constitutive theories of discourse—theories positioned *in opposition* to these traditions but which actually *share an underlying, objectifying structure and attitude toward the earth and materiality, a deep desire to deny our existence as embodied beings, as flesh*. I believe we do constitute our

reality through symbols, but we do not just conceptualize nature—we are “nature with a concept of nature” (Griffin, *Woman* 226). How, then, can we study human communication without studying our worldly existence—our physical environment, our physiology, our “nature” as embodied subjects? To do so must entail more than just studying our ideological constructions of these elements; at the same time, I am by no means advocating a return to behaviorism and positivism in the study of human communication. Admitting and embracing the power of discourse does not necessitate either continued objectification of the earth or continued denial of our own earthly natures.

The Materiality of Discourse

This argument regarding the material qualities of discourse engages recent materialist challenges to the idealist bent in rhetorical and communication studies. The position I advocate here, because of its environmental as well as human liberatory focus, both builds from and challenges arguments for the materiality of discourse (Biesecker; Cloud; McGee; Sloop and Ono). Primarily, these theorists critique the field for its idealist foundations and tendencies and argue for privileging a materialist theory of some sort, generally with the goal of advancing social change. At the core of my argument, however, is not only a critique of idealism but a move toward deconstructing the validity of the idealist/materialist opposition which these theorists appear to accept *a priori*.

Dana Cloud identifies two versions of the materiality of discourse hypothesis. The first, “idealist materialism,” holds that “rhetoric is material simply by virtue of its pragmatic effects in the world” (146). Michael McGee, for example, emphasizes the material conditions within which certain rhetorical acts have “pragmatic presence” (“Materialist’s” 29), that is, the historically specific distributions of resources (economic, political, discursive) which privilege certain subject positions, interpretive frameworks, and speech acts. Similarly, Sloop and Ono emphasize the importance of understanding the conditions of everyday life (that is, not merely some ideological conception of life) within which judgments, sense-making, and their attendant effects occur. In this view, rhetoric is a type of practice, an historically embedded and socially effective human act, a transformation of the conditions of living. Idealist materialists, in short, represent the marriage of constitutive theories of discourse with a sustained attention to the power relations within which reality is constituted.

To my reading, this version of the materiality of discourse hypothesis understands *discourse as materially embedded but not material per se*. Cloud, for example, is concerned that recent work by McGee and others has switched to a focus on the intertextual context of a rhetorical act, thereby slighting the material (e.g., economic) conditions which enable

and enforce dominant ideologies. As Cloud writes, "so instead of discovering the economic or political interests motivating ideological discourses, the critic is reduced to describing patterns across cultural texts" (151). Ideologies occur in a material matrix, constitute our perceptions and experiences, and thereby mystify underlying material conditions. A clear opposition between the ideational and the material is maintained, with discourse being materially embedded but retaining its ideational nature.

The second version of the materiality of discourse hypothesis identified by Cloud is the "discursivity of the material." Represented by the work of Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe, and others, this version of the hypothesis questions the distinction between the material and the ideational; it posits that no (meaningful) "reality" exists outside of human symbolic activity and that all human action is enabled by discursive (power/knowledge) formations. As Cloud explains,

The theory of discourse here is more properly called the discursivity of the material rather than the materiality of discourse. The oppositions material-ideal and real-ideological are completely collapsed into one another, so that the distinctions between ideology and reality, superstructure and base, no longer have meaning. The materialist project of demystification is abandoned in the process. (153)

The abandonment of the "materialist project of demystification" leads Cloud to reject this view. Once power relations are reduced to "a set of competing reality definitions that are unfixed, free-floating, and malleable" the critic is left with no firm place from which to argue for positive social change (154).

I want to complicate Cloud's reading of this perspective by rereading McGee, the theorist on whom she primarily relies to make her critique. Cloud's critique centers on Laclau and Mouffe's claim that "human beings socially construct their world, and it is through this construction—always precarious and incomplete—that they give a thing *its being*" (89).⁹ In response, she cites McGee's defense of the distinction between the discursive and the real:

Action is doing-to the world, the chopping of trees, their shaping for use, and the being-within an environment human beings have altered. There is a tremendous gulf between action and discourse, the distance between murder, for example, and the "symbolic killing" of name-calling. . . . In truth, *the only actions that consist in discourse are performed on discourse itself*. Speech will not fell a tree, and one cannot write a house to dwell in. ("Transcendentalism" 122)

This position is consistent with the logic of the first version of the materiality of discourse hypothesis. Discourse serves to coordinate the necessary labor, establish a system of meanings in which the cutting of a tree is a sensical act, and so forth, but it is not discourse itself which cuts down the tree nor, it seems, is the felled tree itself discursive.

There certainly are differences between putting words to paper and clear cutting, but I question whether the distinction that matters is one of discourse versus action or ideological versus material production.

The putting of pen to paper is a brute act of physical force, as is the clear cut. Both involve the use of technologies; neither act is "natural," both are invented. Both require a system of meaning to legitimate the act, to deem it worthy. Both enact a system of meaning and allow multiple interpretations of their traces. In the current economic system, each act is materially inseparable: the clear cut does not take place without government regulations, administrative actions, surveying from maps, the use of machines planned with pen and paper; the putting of pen to paper does not occur without the harvesting and processing of natural resources such as trees. When I fly over a clear cut, see felled trees alongside a forest road, and pass full logging trucks, I am not only seeing the result of a discursive formation, I am seeing its material traces, like words on a page. The square or triangle shape of a clear cut viewed from a plane and the stumps on the side of a road are both brutally physical (material) and discursive (meaningful). Similarly so were the passage and enactment of the salvage rider which allowed the clear-cutting of "burned" or "infested" trees.

McGee himself works toward this conclusion but chooses not to carry it through when he writes that "what actually happens as a result of 'speech' is less important than the fact that every 'speech' is a miniature predictive model of the 'changes' which it recommends" ("Materialist's" 43). I argue that the distinction between the predictive model and the practice is shifting, fluid, and recursive. Thus, while McGee argues that "a study of rhetoric . . . is predominately a study of practice. . . . [Rhetoric] is a thing, a material artifact of human interaction" (45), just how some material artifacts are discursive and others are not is unclear.¹⁰

A significant advance in rhetorical criticism in recent decades has been a move away from individual rhetors and speech acts towards discursive systems and the implications of discursive patterns. Following this line, McGee writes that rhetoric "exists on a continuum from the absolutely specific experience of being persuaded to the absolutely general experience of having been conditioned to a pattern of social and political opinions" ("Materialist's" 31). The latter is most commonly encapsulated in Gramsci's concept of hegemony; that is, the ability of the power bloc to promote its interests by defining what it is possible to think and do in a particular historical moment. Barbara Biesecker draws from the work of Michel Foucault to make a case for the discursive nature of power and the material nature of discourse; her view rejects not only the individualistic attitude underlying much rhetorical criticism but the importance of singular and bounded discursive acts:

Power names not the imposition of a limit that constrains human thought and action but a being-able that is made possible by a grid of intelligibility. Power is a human calculation performed within and inaugurated by the "lines of making sense" that are operative at a particular historical moment or, as Spivak put it, a "can-do"-ness whose condition of existence is an orientation in time and space. (Biesecker 356)

This not only further blurs the distinction between discourse and action, the ideational and the material, but it also raises the question of what constitutes this "grid of intelligibility." Living in a city laid out in a grid, a city pulsing with electricity, with lights, traffic, electricity, water, and sewer controlled by computers and engineers, a city that looks a lot like a computer chip, is certainly part of that "grid" of intelligibility. Driving through miles of crops laid out in neat rows which are irrigated by water taken from an artificial reservoir that might be visited on a family vacation—these material actions and their traces affect one's subjectivity and ideological orientation in much the same way as what is normally identified as "discourse" (books, television shows, computer games, familial narratives). As Fiske explains in his discussion of Bourdieu's theory of "habitus," "the material, the symbolic, and the historical are not separate categories but interactive lines of force whose operations structure the macro-social order" ("Cultural Studies" 155). Therefore, "a critical rhetoric is a timely discourse whose task is not, as we have heretofore thought, one of 'changing what's in people's heads.' Instead, it is about turning the grid of intelligibility that organizes the present" (Biesecker 361). What is the difference between changing ideologies and changing the nature of our "being-able"? Put another way, what is the point of changing ideologies if the material traces of the previous ideologies continue to surround us and critical skills for the reading of these material traces are not widely available?

The Erasure of Nature

The largest omission by those arguing for materialism in communication studies is the "natural" material conditions within which we all exist—our physical bodies, geography, and climate. When these theorists encourage us to take into account not simply "ideas" (naively understood as springing forth from our minds) but the material conditions and consequences of those ideas, the *nonhuman* material conditions making up our lifeworld are consistently ignored. Materiality includes natural conditions as well, but it is the *socially created* material conditions which these critics have emphasized (e.g., Sloop and Ono) at the almost complete expense of "natural" conditions. Yet these "natural" conditions are enabling and constraining, as are discourses and economic structures.

This impulse to ignore the physical world, I believe, is a continuing manifestation of the desire to see humans as not a part of nature, but as self-constructed beings. Whether that construction is seen as primarily ideational or economic, our natural existence is denied. Just as modern food delivery, water, waste disposal, and climate control systems serve to (falsely) liberate/separate us from the constraints of our natural existence, *constitutive theories of discourse enable a cultural amnesia regarding our immersion in natural systems*. In addition to enacting what Haraway terms "productionism," the ideology that "humans make

all things," the constitutive view is also, understandably and legitimately, a response to the oppressive uses to which claims about what is "natural" human behavior have been put.

Essentialism/Constructivism

In rejecting claims about the "objective truth" or the "essence" of nature, we should not reject nature itself/herself/themselves. Yet by turning to constitutive views of communication, whether they be idealist or materialist in orientation, that is indeed what we have done. As Mark Seltzer argues, "the rule-of-thumb that has guided much recent cultural criticism might be restated in these terms: when confronted by the nature/culture opposition, choose the culture side." The assumption appears to be that deconstructing the dichotomy "indicated merely the elimination of the first term and the inflation of the second" (155). A clear reason for embracing culture is the apparent political benefit: legitimating oppressive social systems by grounding them in "natural" patterns and behaviors is a classic tactic of the white, heterosexist, patriarchal, capitalist hegemony. If social orders are not natural, the logic goes, they must be cultural, and are thereby both lacking absolute foundations and open to de- and re-construction.

Cindy Griffin's recent critique of the essentialist roots of the public sphere proceeds from exactly these premises: that any "argument for fixed, unchanging characteristics that determine an individual's behaviors or actions . . . can and has led to reductionist, totalizing, and damaging views of women and men" (22-23). She effectively argues that an essentialist ideology of gender differences has formed the conceptualization of the public sphere in a way that excludes nondominant forms of discourse and normalizes certain value-laden communicative structures (mastery, dichotomy, and hierarchy) in the public sphere and in rhetorical theory.

While I find Griffin's argument compelling and important, I believe she risks reinforcing a binary opposition between essentialist and constitutive approaches to communication that implies they are the only options. She argues that "essentialism can be and has been used to silence, pigeonhole and oppress women" (37). While she does not explicitly develop the alternative view, she indicates it is "constructionism," and she enacts this view in her critique (e.g., in her use of the concept of ideology). My argument here has been that given its positioning of "mankind" above nature, constructionism is anthropocentric; when combined with the deeply-rooted, essentialist ideology that women are more a part of nature than of mankind, constructionism can also be "used to silence, pigeonhole and oppress"—not only women, but also "nature" and all things deemed "feminine."

Because arguments about the "nature" of women have been used to justify their oppression, any explanation involving nature is rejected by

most academics on the left. Either nature is seen as determinant—as the active, structuring force behind human behavior—or nature is seen as passive, as in-formed by social and discursive practice. I by no means defend essentialism, nor do I completely reject constitutive theories. What I reject is how nature is positioned in both: as either fixed, singular, totalizing, and deterministic or as malleable and insignificant in and of itself. Both, I believe, are ideologies that have been and continue to be linked with patriarchal discourse. Nature should not be punished because of the claims made about it/her/them.

To summarize, constitutive theories of communication ignore (if not negate) nature, and thereby collude in the objectifying structures of meaning pervasive in Western culture. In our desire to liberate humans, contemporary critical scholars, like our intellectual ancestors, have turned nature into an object, something infused with meaning by humans. At the very least, not only does this perpetuate certain attitudes about the natural world, it also affects the very humans whose lives are intertwined with nature—both because of an inescapable interconnectedness and because of common cultural positionings (e.g., nature as a “female” entity and women as more bound by their “nature”). Constitutive theories may provide accurate models of how discourse is and has been done, especially by dominating classes and ideologies—but that doesn’t mean discursive action has to be done that way.

Environmental Rhetoric and the Silencing of Nature

Biesecker opens her essay on Foucault by arguing that the discipline of rhetoric is “profoundly utopian” because it operates “out of the firm conviction that things can change, be otherwise, different—in fact better—provided that human beings intervene symbolically in a history that is of their own making” (351). Perhaps nowhere is a radical recognition of the materiality of discourse needed more than in studies of environmental discourse, in part because in few areas of study is the emphasis on ideas to the exclusion of materiality more oxymoronic. Yet environmental criticism habitually falls into the utopian and idealistic framework Biesecker identifies. Perhaps even more importantly, ecocriticism in communication and other disciplines continues the silencing of nature by emphasizing human constructs to the exclusion of nonhuman constructs. Two not-atypical examples serve to illustrate this trend.

Lynn Stearney’s essay on the use of the maternal archetype in environmental rhetoric clearly identifies both the symbolic power of the nurturing female and the dangers that symbol poses for feminism. As she demonstrates, by holding that women are more suited to nurturing both children and the planet, an essentialist ideology of gender roles is reinforced. However, Stearney’s focus on the importance of which

metaphors we choose positions her as an idealist in that she overemphasizes thoughts and texts as determinants of social change (Cloud). Stearney is by no means alone. Susan Griffin, for example, repeatedly states that the problem of Western culture's treatment of the earth is "philosophical . . . a structure of the mind that shapes all our days, all our perceptions"; "what remains to be changed now," she argues, "is an attitude, a psychological orientation to existence" (*Eros* 29 and 46). In Stearney's article, this idealism takes the form of considering the implications of the maternal archetype for feminism, ecofeminism, environmentalism, and, finally, the earth, as well as suggesting that gender-neutral metaphors "may ultimately prove more useful . . . for the ecofeminist project" (157). Not only does Stearney's position reinforce ideas as determinant, but her critique ignores or dismisses nature's role in this definitional process. No discussion occurs about what metaphors or other types of symbols the natural world "suggests." Following the anti-essentialist orthodoxy, any claims concerning the natural qualities of the earth or women are dismissed as constraining and oppressive. While I do not take issue with Stearney's analysis of the maternal image or some of her conclusions, I do find it problematic that in discussing appropriate metaphors for nature and the environmental movement, nature seems to play no part. Human constructions of the nature of nature continue to position nature as passive and inert, as a nonparticipant in dialogue.

A more striking example of the exclusion of nature from discussions of environmental rhetoric is provided by Panetta and Condit's essay on ecocentrism and argumentative competence. They identify existing argumentative strategies in the deforestation debate and argue for the inability of those strategies to resolve conflicts and create workable solutions. Then, on the way to developing their postmodern, ecocentric model of argumentation they dismiss another alternative, deep ecology. Deep ecology calls for a new sense of identification which transcends humanity to include other species of plants and animals as well as "nonliving" entities. Panetta and Condit reject the possibility of this new identification on definitional grounds:

The notion that "identification" can be reconceived of so as to create linkages between humans and other species seems dubious. . . . Identification is a communication concept and it is meta-theoretically bounded to those who can participate dialectically and mutually in the communicative process of unity and division. To our knowledge, most other species and the non-organic elements of the planet fall outside this process of "identifying." (216-17)¹¹

To be communicative, to "participate dialectically and mutually" in interaction, is, by definition, to be *human*. Although Panetta and Condit claim to move away from modernist theories of argument, which they agree "are presiding over the destruction of our environment" (217), their "ecocentric theory of argumentation" remains thoroughly anthropocentric. When they write that a new "common interest . . . must truly be constituted by all voices on the planet, rather than those

who are 'most articulate' " (220), they are referring only to humans, whose "nature" is "communicative" (217). Thus, while Panetta and Condit critique idealism by arguing that material conditions limit ideological possibilities and that ideas alone cannot save the planet, there is no role for the planet (and therefore "all voices on the planet") in their model of argumentation, except as the object of discussion and contention, a thing needing to be saved from us.

"Nature" and Dialogue

To listen to "nature" instead of objectifying and subjugating it/her/ them is, perhaps, similar to Nietzsche's will to power: the affirmation of becoming and multiplicity, the embracing of the lack of totality and the impossibility of control. Taking joy in what *is* instead of in ideals requires listening "otherwise than in good form(s)." And to do that,

one should get rid of the all, the unity, some force, something unconditioned; otherwise one will never cease regarding it as the highest court of appeal and baptizing it "God." One must shatter the all; unlearn respect for the all; take what we have given to the unknown and the whole and give it back to what is nearest, what is ours. (Nietzsche, *Will* 181)

What is nearest, I believe, is *life*: body, matter, earth, turbulence, and other material "fictions" that Western culture has generally lumped with the feminine. What, then, happens to "nature"?

Nature is for me, and I venture for many of us who are planetary fetuses gestating in the amniotic effluvia of terminal industrialism, one of those impossible things characterized by Gayatri Spivak as that which we cannot not desire. Excruciatingly conscious of nature's discursive constitution as "other" in the histories of colonialism, racism, sexism, and class domination of many kinds, we nonetheless find in this problematic, ethno-specific, long-lived, and mobile concept something we cannot do without, but can never "have." We must find another relationship to nature besides reification and possession. (Haraway 296)

As we continue to develop theories about how discourse does and can work, there are models of dialogue with the earth that offer guidance in walking the line between the reification of nature inherent in objectivism and the possession implicated in humanism.¹² Elements of such dialogic models are evident in ecocriticism (Evernden), ecofeminism (Bullis; Diamond and Orenstein; S. Griffin; King) and at the margins of science (Keller) and philosophy (Deleuze and Parnet).

Philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Gilles Deleuze provide us with highly abstract conceptualizations of dialogic epistemologies. For example, what I am calling for here could fall within Deleuze's definition of empiricism, which he equates with pluralism. As Deleuze explains, in idealist and rationalist philosophies,

the abstract is given the task of explaining, and it is the abstract that is realized in the concrete. One starts with abstractions such as the One, the Whole, the Subject, and one looks for the process by which they are embodied in a world which they make conform to their requirements. . . .

Empiricism starts with a completely different evaluation: analysing the states of things, in such a way that non-preexistent concepts can be extracted from them. States of things are neither unities nor totalities, but *multiplicities* . . . a set of lines or dimensions which are irreducible to one another. In a multiplicity what counts are not the terms or the elements, but what there is "between," the between, a set of relations which are not separable from one another. (Deleuze and Parnet vii)

Deleuze argues for an epistemology which begins with the concrete, without the reifying and totalizing will to truth evident in conventional science. As Neil Evernden argues, when we encounter a phenomenon, "we have a choice between explaining it or accepting it" (117); the former turns it into "one of" some category or concept while the latter entails "a truly radical empiricism, an unadulterated exposure to the otherness of nature" (114).

In communication studies we have the difficulty and the joy of being "in between," neither completely abstract nor completely concrete. We theorize, we conceptualize, and we do so based in and about material practices (McGee, "Materialist's"). We study neither "only" culture nor "only" nature; we are about meanings and concepts, but meanings are produced through physiological processes, through embodied action and interpretation (Burke; Kristeva). Communication scholars are therefore well positioned to begin the work of (re)constructing theories of discourse that acknowledge and promote dialogues that embrace rather than negate our inseparability from nature. Such a project might begin with the following questions: In constructing genuinely liberatory theories of communication, how can "nature" be invited to participate in the dialogue without, at the same time, singularizing and deifying it/her/them? without returning to totalizing claims based on the inevitability of natural law? How can the advantages of a constitutive position be retained without reproducing "the deadly point of view of productionism"? What assumptions about the nature of discourse that are at the base of the constitutive view (e.g., its relation to material practice, separation and privilege, its "humanism") must be called into question?

Elaborating such an alternative theory is not easy, for to participate within the bounds, even expanding ones, of academic and other "literate" discourses is to participate in the idealist heritage embodied in their form and content (Derrida). In developing an alternative theory, idealizing and essentializing "nature" must be avoided, in two senses: we must avoid conceiving of "nature" as a benevolent, caring entity, and we must avoid conceiving of nature as a singular entity of any sort—that is, conflating our idea of nature with the natural world. As Nietzsche wrote, "one should not say 'nature is cruel.' Precisely the insight that no such central responsible being exists is a relief!" (*Will* 218). Nature "is" a multiplicity of forces and entities, none of which we may ever know directly but which can nonetheless be a legitimate part of the communicative process. Thus, an alternative theory should adopt a dialogic approach, one which acknowledges the interdependency of

the entities involved in the sense that each is affected by the other, that each may come to know itself through interaction with the other, and that the boundaries between them are permeable (Bakhtin). There are, ultimately, no *a priori* parties who engage in "exchange"; rather, there are fluid forces which affect one another in nonlinear, embedded, and unpredictable ways (cf. the discussions of chaos theory in Gleick and in Merchant's *Earthcare*).

In *Earthcare*, Carolyn Merchant identifies three existing relations humans have with the environment: *egocentric*, in which the individual's needs are privileged; *homocentric*, in which human needs dominate; and *ecocentric*, in which the natural world's needs take precedence. Her alternative is a *partnership* ethic grounded in the concept of *relation* rather than in one faction's dominance over another. Likewise, Ynestra King identifies the task of ecofeminism as the "forging of a genuinely antidualistic . . . theory and practice" (116) in which freedom is conceived as "neither antisocial or antinatural" and wherein "we recover ontology as the ground for ethics" (120). While critics such as myself are fairly skilled at identifying the problems with dominant paradigms, we often produce little more than vague outlines of the alternatives. What might a "relational," "ontological," and "antidualistic" theory of communication become like?

Pain and Communion

In *Eros and Everyday Life* Griffin urges us to recover the lost senses of the word "communion" (and its relative communication), meaning both "together" and "change." By maintaining a one-way relationship with the earth "what is lost to public awareness is a strong visceral reaction to environmental disaster, the bodily intelligence necessary to survival" (*Eros* 44), for "all experience of material existence threatens the imaginary schism between nature and consciousness" (Griffin, "Curves" 93). As Killingsworth and Palmer write in their essay on environmental hysteria, "if we are to understand what the earth is telling us, then we must . . . leave aside the old Cartesianism, and see the mind and the body as nodes in an overall energy system driven by both conscious and unconscious forces" (330). Echoing Griffin, they argue that "the cry of pain . . . repeated again and again in successive environmental catastrophes . . . signals the return of the repressed, the earthly unconscious" (330). This repressed voice exists in, around, and between humans and the "natural" world, but we must learn "how to listen otherwise than in good form(s) to hear what it says."

Griffin writes of her childhood experiences with the mountains, deserts, and ocean near Los Angeles as "transformational exchanges which touched me and through which I learned the nature of existence. I was taught. But . . . the cosmology I had been given by my culture . . . would not embrace this knowledge." If the natural world seems to have meaning, she observes, this meaning is understood as "just an appear-

ance, a sentimental overlay, one which only the naive, children, the uneducated, or those from lesser cultures, take at face value" (*Eros* 84). The loss and pain felt by many in response to environmental destruction is similarly dismissable as naive and illusory. In the context of critical and cultural studies, such a response is dismissable as "discursively constituted." Joan Scott, for example, argues that privileging "experience" "precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system" that produced it (778). She calls for an approach "that takes all categories of analysis as contextual, contested, and contingent" (796). While I heartily agree with this last statement, I refuse to reduce *everything* to its origin in (an anthropocentric conception of) discourse. Experience is material, and hence political, because of its implication in social systems, but context should also include the natural world and discourse should not exclude everything nonhuman.

For example, when I drive over a dam and look at a large reservoir filling a canyon, I feel a deep, pulsing hurt throughout my body. I admit this is a constructed response, but it is potentially constructed not only by certain environmental ideologies but by an interaction with and an alienation from what did, does, and could exist in that space—an environment composed of multiple entities and forces with whom I interact, which reveal certain aspects of my existence, and which affect my sensory, spiritual, affective, and cognitive experiences. In short, the natural world can function as a discourse—that is, as an *effective force*, as something not only imbued with meaning but which itself can help provide experience with meaning. To dismiss all experiences of pain and bliss associated with the natural world as naive or socially constructed is to dismiss these possibilities.

In *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, Terry Tempest Williams presents a story of the flooding of the Great Salt Lake, the displacement of its already constrained bird populations, and her family's experience with cancer. The influences of natural forces (a heavy winter, quick snowmelt, the shallowness of the lake) and unnatural forces (attempts to channel and contain the lake's water sources, fallout from nuclear tests in Nevada) are woven together, each illuminating, obscuring, paralleling, or contradicting the others. The women in Williams' family have become "the clan of one-breasted women," their cancer an incitement for Williams to engage in civil disobedience. The bird sanctuaries of the Great Salt Lake are at first lost but eventually transformed, and this becomes an incitement for Williams to accept the deaths of her female ancestors. The lake's natural fluctuations (admittedly affected by human development) and an unnatural epidemic of cancer both had something to tell Williams. Certainly her professional, religious, and political ideologies influenced her interpretations and responses to these experiences, but that does not preclude the possibility of an "other," someone/something outside of her (socially constructed) boundaries, who/which helped her develop

ethical insight. I believe our current theories of discourse and communication are unable to account for this experience, and in fact, actively dismiss and deny its validity.

A materialist theory of discourse opens up several possibilities heretofore denied. Material structures, traces, and actions—whether natural or unnatural—can be understood as discursive forces which shape our subjectivities and enable some possibilities (pain telling us something is terribly wrong) while constraining others (a dam's provision of water and electricity perpetuating a "false consciousness" of separation from the natural world). McGee writes that "we too often forget that there is no type of discourse which cannot function as 'speech' in a material rhetoric" ("Materialist's" 39). We also forget how materially discourse can function. Remembering both of these potentialities requires a theory of discourse capable of accounting for not just the "material" but the natural world as well.¹³

Theories do not spring forth wholly formed from a single or even collective consciousness. From a materialist perspective, new theories develop out of social, economic, political, discursive, and other changes which occur systemically and in an overdetermined context of struggle. To say that the idealist-materialist distinction which most materialist theories of communication take for granted is itself an ideological construct, and that these opposing philosophies and forces are—as with any dialectical pair—deeply identified is easy (Burke, *Rhetoric*). To escape the binary is a more difficult matter. Nevertheless, this essay serves as another step in that direction by arguing that a "genuine" materialism must question the epistemology/ontology split. We must avoid the traps of reverting to a simplistic positivism, in which ontology determines epistemology, or to an extreme idealism, in which epistemology displaces ontology.

Nietzsche argues that "man" created totalizing, foundationalist systems of meaning in order to create a sense of being part of "some whole that is infinitely superior to him"; this allowed "man" to see "himself as a mode of the deity" (*Will* 12). These totalities—God, the free market, ideal forms, objective reality—have been convincingly critiqued by critical scholars for their collusion with oppressive social systems. However, "discourse" has now replaced objective reality, *a priori* structures, and other constructs as the new foundation. As with all foundationalist discourses, this construction excludes and objectifies—in this case, the earth and other "feminine" forces. "Discourse" has become, in Nietzsche's formulation, the new "all, the unity" which has been given the power to determine our world and make us feel god-like, as the producers of all that matters (*Will* 181). As the producers of discourse (even if we do so collectively, not individually), we can believe in our own value because no value, no meaning exists outside of discourse. We must end the tyranny of the symbol.

Remember Rocky Flats

Such a reconstructive project is, I believe, crucial. Recall the situation with which I began this essay: vast amounts of radioactive wastes ignored, misplaced, lost, leaking. This problem is still with us and will be for the (in)conceivable future. I do not mean to suggest that reconstructing communication theories offers a way out of this problem, nor that it will prevent other insanities on the immediate horizon, insanities such as the manipulation of genes and molecules to literally re-form life and the material world. However, these new threats, as with the old, are intimately connected to our understandings of the world, knowledge, and symbols: scientists now see the world as "information" and are working to *rewrite the codes* that form molecules into both living and "nonliving" matter (Rifkin). In the cultural unconscious, I believe, the epistemological assumptions of the science of late capitalism and the communication theories of (post)modernism converge: the world is something to be constituted by human beings, to be in-formed and re-formed through human activity. Plato, Descartes, and Kant are still with us—not simply because they are taught in universities, but because their epistemologies are *performed*, materially, on a daily basis.

The primary criteria for the type of materialist, transhuman, dialogic theory of communication I call for here might be (1) the resurrection of a place for natural forces, traits, and structures in communication theory while avoiding a return to natural determinism; (2) an affirmation that we humans are embodied creatures embedded in a world that is not entirely our own making; (3) a rehearsal of ways of listening to nondominant voices and nonhuman agents and their inclusion in the production of meaning, policy, and material conditions; (4) the deconstruction of common sense binaries such as subject/object, social/natural, and ideational/material, and a reconstruction of relationships as dialogic: recursive, interdependent, and fluid. Such a theoretical project could enrich the scope of communication theory and criticism while embracing the value and dynamism of the extrasocial world. Old tools tend to reproduce old structures. The reconstruction of a different relationship to the environment in which we live requires radically alternative conceptions of humans, nature, material conditions, and discourse.

Despite my critique of Burke's theory of language, his elaboration of the consequences of our symbolicity has only been reinforced by this essay: we are moralized by the negative (nihilism and its consequences), separated from our natural conditions by instruments of our own making (or at least we strive for separation), goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (mind over body, humans over nature), and rotten with perfection (remember Rocky Flats) (*Language* 16). I want not to escape symbolism, but to promote and nurture *different* modes of symbolic activity. Theories can serve to reify certain symbolic modes, thereby

obscuring other possibilities and reinforcing affiliated activities such as the human genome project. Our theories do matter to the extent that they are, in Edward Said's terms, "worldly"—produced in a particular historical context, existing within a web of ideological affiliations, and potentially effective in the social and natural worlds. We must therefore take them seriously—not simply as more babel from the ivory tower, nor as ends in themselves, but as part of the ongoing construction of how the world, human beings, and social activity can and should operate (C. Griffin). We must begin, from our corner of the world, to articulate the implications and affiliations of what we do to the rest of the social formation *and* to the natural world. We must continue to challenge the destructive and work to foster affirming and sustainable ways of life.

NOTES

¹The formulations in this sentence are borrowed from Nietzsche and Fanon.

²My use of "nature" in this essay should be read in the context of Ono and Sloop's argument that while critics must maintain a *telos*, they must do so contingently, putting a seemingly essentialist/idealized concept to paper in the course of advancing a position with a simultaneous recognition of the concept's ultimate contingency/fictionality.

³Considerable interest has been expressed recently concerning the insights Nietzsche's works offer contemporary rhetorical critics and theorists (see Desilet; Thomas; Whitson and Poulakis). Some of the potential influences of his ideas on rhetoric, criticism, and communication theory are demonstrated throughout this essay.

⁴As much as I would like (and fear!) to give academic discourse a greater role in constructing our social world, I am not arguing that constitutive theories are responsible for centuries of environmental destruction. I *am* arguing that they are deeply affiliated with those hegemonic discourses which are directly implicated in such destruction. By sharing similar structures of meaning, constitutive theories are complicit in perpetuating those structures as "common sense."

⁵As should be evident from the essay as a whole, I am not positing any "real," "natural," or "essential" connection between women or femininity and nature. Instead, my critique acknowledges and builds from the culturally constructed, "common sense" ideology that connects women and femininity with nature, body, emotion, and materiality. This ideology's existence and operation has been demonstrated and critiqued by feminists in a variety of disciplines (e.g., C. Griffin; S. Griffin; Merchant; Schott).

⁶Irigaray's essay has been critiqued as insufficiently grounded in an awareness of actual scientific practice. However, Hayles has reinforced and extended Irigaray's thesis through a more detailed analysis of scientific and fluid mechanics texts. In addition, Irigaray's basic thesis regarding the unpredictability of turbulence is confirmed, or at least mirrored, by several reviews of chaos theory (see, e.g., Gleick).

⁷The images in the previous three paragraphs are compiled from my own observations, Else's television documentary *Cadillac Desert*, and Reggio's film *Koyaanisqatsi*. I credit *Koyaanisqatsi* in particular for the insights I arrived at by contemplating these images, and subsequent references to Reggio are intended to acknowledge that enormous debt.

⁸Fractal geometry provides a more comprehensive and mathematical version of this argument. As Mandelbrot, "inventor" of fractals, writes, "clouds are not spheres, mountains are not cones, coastlines are not circles, and bark is not smooth, nor does lightning travel in a straight line" (1). "Fractal" is a neologism referring to "fractional dimensions," a recognition that the natural world cannot be described in terms of a dimensional system arbitrarily limited to whole numbers.

⁹I find Cloud's reading of Laclau and Mouffe to be mildly problematic because she seems to conflate a distinction they make between a thing's being and its existence. A thing's *existence*, they explain, is its state prior to or outside of any discursive formation. A thing's *being*, on the other hand, is its meaning(s) within a social and discursive context. Therefore, Laclau and Mouffe do not deny that things exist prior to discourse but, as with most versions of constructivism, argue that humans never experience anything's existence in an unmediated fashion.

¹⁰I am not arguing discursive is *all* these acts are, but rather that they are nonetheless potentially discursive; discursivity is one of the qualities they can be assigned. I note also that McGee makes distinctions between discourse and rhetoric that I gloss here.

¹¹Connie Bullis's critique of deep ecology is positioned very differently. She finds the move to identify the self with all of nature as troubling because concern for the earth comes as a result of expanding the boundaries of the ego to achieve unity through transcendence. This preserves existing patriarchal structures of meaning by focusing on expanding the self and its attendant "rights" rather than creating a relationship in which the "other" has intrinsic value.

¹²"Humanism" may replace "God" and "Truth," but its function can still be the same: serving as "the One" that negates what *is* — which is not just "us" but the natural world as well. It may well be that Foucault's "death of the subject" (e.g., the transcendental, essential subject presupposed by the Enlightenment) is a necessity if we are to survive the current ecological crisis. Nietzsche's call for the "Übermensch" (Overman) is not about domination, but about overcoming what it has meant to be (hu)man since Plato — overcoming the affirmation of *ideals* instead of *life*. For "truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live" (*Will* 272). Paradoxically, we have to destroy ourselves in order to survive.

¹³Two theories of discourse falling outside the narrower boundaries of the North American discipline of communication studies which do work to account for the dual nature of humans (ideational and material, social and natural), though not with an environmental focus, are Kristeva's psychoanalytic semiotics and Laughlin et al.'s biogenetic structuralism.

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