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**RHETORIC IN REALITY:
POSTMODERNISM VIEWED FROM OUTER SPACE**

[Maximilian Werner](#)

It is hardly surprising that rhetoricians, aggrieved at the continually increasing authority and efficacy of science, would insist that the laws of discourse take precedence over the laws of science.

~ Joseph Carrol

Show me a cultural relativist at 30,000 feet and I'll show you a hypocrite.

~ Richard Dawkins

We will not serve what we do not love.
And we cannot love what we do not know.

~ Loyal Rue

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

~ Walt Whitman

How to be happy and true
is the quest we're taking on together.

~ Eddie Vedder

When I was an undergraduate studying English at the University of Utah, I remember taking Introduction to the Theory of Literature my first year. The course was a disaster. I was an awful student of critical theory. Like most burgeoning English majors I knew at the time, I wanted to read and write literature, not to study what other people *thought it meant* to read and write literature. And then there was the fellow who headed the class. He had a pretentious fondness for Derrida that I did not understand, partly because I did not understand Derrida himself, and partly because as a teacher he was so self-absorbed that he could not reach any but the most earnest students. At least he did not reach me. After class, I would often see him in some corner of the cafeteria, where he would practice his French with a colleague who also taught theory for the department. I guessed they were talking about Derrida, but who could say? Together, these elements would constitute my introduction to the world of critical theory, what Robert Storey, author of *Mimesis and the Human Animal: On the Biogenetic Foundations of Literary Representation*, aptly describes as the “hermetic anthropocentrism of poststructuralism” (206). I wore the “D” I earned in that class like a badge of shame, but we shun what shames us, and so even though postmodernism of one form or another dominated the department, I managed to earn my degree while still avoiding this fellow, his ilk, and their “floating head” theories whose relevance would cease the instant I closed the book or left the classroom. Perhaps I was lucky.

My orientation to literature was, if anything, romantic, and I would continue to entertain this view of language, literature, *and life*, ultimately, as an M.F.A. student in poetry at Arizona State University. The creative writing program there did not proffer any alternatives. In fact, the only challenge came when I, along with several other teachers-in-training, attended a weekly TA seminar taught by rhetoricians. The class was designed to help us become more effective teachers by introducing us to various rhetorical theories, principles, and strategies. I don't know how the literature students felt, but the poets resisted the rhetorical approach to language. Indeed, they were suspicious of, if not hostile to any approach that sought to demystify the medium with which they rendered their personal afflatus. Moreover, I am sure that the rhetors in the classroom experienced their own unique dismay at what they must have seen as our beautiful but ineffectual and anachronistic conception of language. “Language for the real world!” seemed to be their credo. I admit that at the time and in that context, both approaches had their own appeal. But that was before I had perceived the world from outer space. Now I see that neither a rhetorical, romantic, nor any wholly subjective view of life and literature is sufficient for addressing the nature, grandeur, crisis -- in short -- the reality of our existence.

I have been teaching writing courses since 1995, and over this nine-year period I have used six different texts, including *Literature and the Environment: A Reader on Culture and Nature*, which is the text I am using currently. With the exception of this last text, the books I have used were different in degree and not in kind. For while their methods varied, they each concentrated on teaching students how to assess the demands of particular writing situations, and on providing them with the tools needed to fulfill those goals. Given that a particular concept or tool is best understood through its application, multiculturalism has emerged as the preferred subject to which to apply these tools. This emergence may also help explain the continued relevance of social constructionists such as Michael Foucault, specifically, his concept of the *episteme* or *discursive formation*, which he defines as “the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems” (Foss, Foss, and Trapper 216).

Considering his interest in science, Foucault is likely trying to evoke ecology with the phrase “total set of relations,” but Foucault's theory has relatively little to do with the known world as it is revealed to us through the sciences, including ecology. Foucault's concept of the episteme is, first and foremost, concerned with how

different groups of people or *formations* construct knowledge and, eventually, truth. Apparently, in Foucault's view, what is true for one is not true for all:

Truth is always dependent on a particular discursive formation; there is no underlying meaning or truth within or imposed on the things of our world. *The truth or knowledge of something rests entirely within the relations of statements inside a discursive formation.* [italics mine]. (qtd. in Foss, Foss, and Trapper 220)

To the extent that individuals and particular groups of people generate particular narratives or perspectives of the truth, Foucault is right. But the postmodern idea that there is “no underlying meaning” in the world apart from what epistemes may produce, and that therefore the only truth is the truth generated within each respective discursive formation, is not only unscientific, it is decidedly false. That a certain perspective is exclusive and therefore hinders access to other ideas is a comment on the limitations of the perspective, not on the degree to which ultimate reality or truth can be known and shared. Foucault himself seems to implicitly acknowledge this when he asks “To what extent is it possible to think differently, rather than legitimizing what is known?” (qtd. in Foss, Foss, and Trapper 213). And yet, one senses Foucault asked the question merely in passing, as if he had suddenly recognized the limits of his archaeological pursuits, pulled his head from out of his episteme, asked the question and then, because he did not have an *ultimate* means to answer the question, returned to his work.

Foucault knew that epistemes are subjective systems of thought that impose their own confinements, so it seems odd that he would look to epistemes for the answer to his question. Indeed, studying epistemes is like admiring the different colors of fire while the house is burning. And yet Foucault's oversight persists, as is evidenced by the emergence of writing texts that emphasize multiculturalism as a means of and context for teaching, among other things, rhetorical principles and strategies. Moreover, though in principle they are much needed, challenges to the mainstream rhetorical tradition, such as feminist and Afrocentric perspectives of rhetoric, also reveal a bias toward culture as a vehicle for determining truth: Competing epistemes attempt to revise the dominant narrative, represented here by the rhetorical tradition, according to their own particular ideological, racial, ethnic or cultural experience. The emergence of these perspectives is, of course, long overdue, and because of it we have begun to appreciate the uniqueness and complexity of human experience. But as the work of Foucault and other social constructionists shows, if truth is regarded as subjective, and one truth is as plausible as another, as long as there is a dominant group, particular subjective truths will prevail. And where certain subjective truths do not prevail, as is reflected, for instance, by the conflict in Iraq and between the Israelis and Palestinians, and by racial tensions here in the United States, violence of one form or another will likely ensue.

According to this culturally relative view of the world, then, truth is arbitrary and exclusive, rather than evidentiary and shared. The consequence is divisiveness. Thus the importance and value of hearing for the first time the distinct voices of silenced, marginalized, oppressed, and “invisible” peoples is coupled with an equally important need for uniting in order to address natural and social ills, a task that exclusive views of the self and world, including the dominant narrative, and the rhetorical theories used to propagate those views, are not equipped to handle. In his book *Everybody's Story: Wising Up to the Epic of Evolution*, Loyal Rue, Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Luther College, explains the challenge of multiculturalism:

A particular story may be mine, and it may be worthwhile, and I may be diminished without it, *but it is not a story that speaks for everyone's experience.* And as I discover the limitations of my own story there is born within me a longing to hear the larger story of which my own is a part -- the universal story, everybody's story. [italics mine] (40-1)

Indeed, it does not matter how many people are singing if they are all singing in different keys. “Nor do these many voices necessarily harmonize” (Gergen 83). These remarks speak to the core of the problem: despite having the goal of encouraging understanding and appreciation of diversity, the various stories of a pluralistic society do not add up to anything we can all share. Similarly, a postmodern or constructionist theory of rhetoric may be useful insofar as it is keyed to helping us understand the peculiar dynamics of particular stories (Foucault's “rules of production,” for instance), but as subjective accounts themselves they fail to honor the

physical world of which all stories are part, on which all stories depend, and from which all stories ultimately arise. Thus, Rue asks “Where do we go for a universal narrative account of how things are and which things matter?” His answer: The paradigm of Darwinian evolution, which has also been described as *environmental realism*.

The paradigm of evolution and multiculturalism share the goal of understanding disparate narratives, but with one important exception: the evolutionary perspective includes *all* life, human and nonhuman, and places a premium on the environment on which all natural and social systems depend. Here culture itself is seen as a product of biology. In contrast to the majority of cultural and religious narratives, which can be characterized as *anthropocentric* or merely humanist, the paradigm of evolution is *ecocentric*. This view of life is based on the fact that we originate from, live in, and depend on a physical world of interrelated systems, and that as the place where all stories happen, indeed, that makes all stories possible, we must care for the world above all else. This means that we must begin the difficult work of talking about things as they really are, and not as we hope them to be. E.O. Wilson, two-time Pulitzer Prize winner and Pellegrino University Research Professor at Harvard, explains why this will not be easy: “Culture conforms to an important principle of evolutionary biology: most change occurs to maintain the organism in its steady state” (107).

Understanding this underlying biological uniformity or shared human nature is the key to valuing our individual stories while still acknowledging and repairing their limitations. I said at the outset that the text I currently use for my writing courses does not fall within the category of cultural reader. As is suggested by the book's title, *Literature and the Environment: A Reader on Culture and Nature*, this reader transcends the limitations of various cultural narratives by inviting the student to examine those narratives in the larger context of nature, our knowledge of which is deeply informed by evolutionary theory. This approach encourages the recognition of human complexity and the importance of our individual stories, but it dissolves the sense of entitlement, privilege, and exclusivity that attends many religious and cultural narratives. The goal is to appreciate and learn from the story, but not be bound by it. In reality, stories and their tellers do not exist in a vacuum, but in a physical world about which much is known. And what students invariably find, either when examining other peoples' stories or their own stories, is that some accounts are more effective than others in terms of describing how things are (cosmological ideas) and which things matter (ideas about morality), which are the universal functions of the story (Rue 23).

Not surprisingly, the majority of essay selections in the *Literature and the Environment* reader are by people with backgrounds in the natural sciences and/or who are of Native American descent; people such as Lester Rowntree, Barry Lopez, Leslie Marmon Silko, Linda Hogan, and Aldo Leopold, just to name a few. Their works were no doubt selected because together they offer realistic and sustainable ways of thinking about human and nonhuman nature. And yet because of this it is difficult to use them as examples of what is involved when our stories do not honor what we know about our membership within the larger community of life. I am therefore always looking for stories that reveal to students exclusive worldviews or challenges to those views. Examples abound. For as Gergen notes in his book *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*, the “postmodern condition more generally is marked by a plurality of voices vying for the right to reality -- to be accepted as legitimate expressions of the true and good” (5).

One such expression appeared in the *Arts and Entertainment* section of my local newspaper, the *Arizona Republic*. At that time, Arizona's newly appointed governor was about to take office, and in honor of that occasion, poet Alberto Rios wrote the new governor an inauguration poem. The first four lines of the newspaper excerpt read: “Speak to the animal in us / And the animal will answer. / Speak to the human in us / And a voice in song will rise.” This poem designates opposites, but the opposites are not humans and other animals, they are aspects of humanity itself, in which case our ability to brutalize is linked to “the animal in us,” whereas whatever else we are, when spoken to, responds in rising song. This quasi-biblical, pre-Darwinian view posits the human as a fallen creature, one that is at odds with itself from the outset, and which transcends its status as a mere animal through art and grace and whatever else lifts us as it rises.

In his book *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature*, Geoffrey Miller

challenges this medieval notion by proposing that the most complex or “highest” expressions of our minds -- including art, music, *and* poetry -- evolved through sexual selection through mate choice: “The human mind’s most impressive abilities are like a peacock’s tail: they are courtship tools, evolved to attract and entertain sexual partners” (5). Art is certainly one of the more valued expressions of our species, but it is no less a part of our evolved human nature than is our ability to brutalize. By attributing our desirable qualities to something extrahuman, Rios’ poem presumes a separation where no such separation exists. Insofar as we are cut off from this aspect of our humanity, our ability to understand human complexity is undermined. Moreover, this view of life represents a bleak forecast for non-human animals, whose songs do not rise in the way ours do.

So far I have used examples to show how ideology imposes its own “mental constrictions.” While the line is fine, when contrasted with religious circumscription, ideological narratives tend to reduce and oversimplify reality. For their part, many religious narratives often represent a *denial* of reality. Humans must navigate a physical world. The degree to which we succeed in this endeavor lies in the stories we tell about ourselves and about our place within the biosphere. In this context, telling a story that is out of touch with reality is supremely contrary to the biological or ultimate function of the story, which is to keep us (individually and genetically) alive. I remember helping a young woman at a writing center where I used to work as a tutor. She was preparing to turn in her first essay and asked me if I would read it. The assignment was to write about an important event in her life, and she chose to write about miscarrying her first and only child. I could barely finish it. Reading about the experience and the emotional pain it caused her was difficult, but the height of that difficulty was her mother’s reaction: A devout Catholic, she explained, or rather, *justified* her daughter’s miscarriage by saying it was the Lord’s way of punishing her for conceiving out of wedlock. When fathomed in the context of two thousand years ago, the mother’s response is understandable, but in a modern context the same response appears insensitive and destructive, especially given the abundance of information for why miscarriage *really* occurs.

Thus, the mother’s response suggests that religion has changed little over the last two millennia. The soul is said to be eternal, but, paradoxically, it is bound to a perception of morality that is over two thousand years old. Rue attributes this transcendental -- as opposed to biological -- morality to the emergence of the Axial Age, a period that would lead to the formation of the world’s major religious traditions. During this time, “a corresponding anthropological dualism detached the self as a unit from both the social and biological aspects of one’s being” (32). In this case, the corporeal is to be transcended through refinements of the soul, and “if there [is] chaos afoot in the mundane order it resulted from the failure of individuals to reconstruct their inner selves to conform to the moral principles inherent in the transcendent order” (33).

Whether or not a worshiper perceives him or herself as a beneficiary, neither perception honors the facts, and to that extent each threatens the self and the larger world of which the self is part. Take, for instance, an article that appeared last December in the *Arizona Republic*. The article “*Sister saves girl, 8, from attack by dog,*” by Susan Carroll, begins this way: “An 8-year-old girl who had her heart set on a pair of new roller skates wants to ask Santa if it’s too late to change her Christmas list.” This is the beginning of a typical human interest story, but Carroll’s approach likely interests one group of humans more than any other, namely, Christians. More importantly, however, is how the opening sentence moves us away from reality into the exclusive realm of religious belief. For people who subscribe to this particular account of how things are, the opening sentence functions as a reaffirmation and signal of the Christian worldview. The question arises, therefore, as to what constitutes *truly* useful information.

For social constructionism, the answer to the question of what constitutes useful information is contingent on who is asked. Here the only criteria that need be met is that the information is *meaningful*. But as my previous examples illustrate, meaningful information does not necessarily equate to *realistic* information, in which case poststructuralist “insights” appear academic at best. This element of contingency dissolves, however, when the question is asked in the context of the evolutionary paradigm, where the usefulness of information is determined by its relevance and connection to the physical world we *all* share.

Later in the article we learn that the dog was “tethered in the yard,” and that the little girl was bitten when she tried to retrieve her “pet bunny,” which the dog had attacked and killed. The little girl’s ten-year-old sister, Vicky,

made the following observation: "The dog *just* got mad and jumped on her and attacked her." I've emphasized the word *just* because it implies that the dog's response was arbitrary and unprovoked. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. Certainly not all canines will behave in this way: like humans, dogs are individuals. But despite biological and cultural differences, dogs and humans share a common nature, and depending on our understanding of that nature we can predict (and thereby prevent) certain outcomes under certain circumstances. This is particularly true in the case of dogs, a species with relatively rudimentary needs, behaviors, and cognitive abilities.

Thus, a basic understanding of animal behavior -- including our own -- tells us that there is a strong likelihood a dog will attack under these circumstances merely as matter of instinct. What are the circumstances? First, the dog was tied, which may have exacerbated aggression due to the animal's increased feeling of vulnerability. Domestic dogs are, of course, descended from wolves, and like us (compared to earlier hominids, modern humans are highly domesticated) they still retain ancestral vestiges, one of which is the tendency to prey on rabbits. Therefore this already potentially volatile situation is compounded by the introduction of the rabbit. Once the dog has killed, its system is flooded with adrenaline, a hormone that affects the dog's ability to assess threat. Add to this heightened state the dog's instinct to protect its food, and the notion that the attack was arbitrary not only appears unfounded, but dangerously disconnected from the actual world.

This interpretation again reflects the pre-Darwinian view of animals as *other* or as unrelated to humans, who, according to Christianity, enjoy a privileged status provided they conform to the Creator's moral prescriptions. For Dorthy Nunez, the little girl's mother, the pinnacle of this privileged status probably came when the Creator intervened on her daughter's behalf: "I really think her sister saved her. It's a miracle." Ms. Nunez's interpretation is understandable, but it functions as an exclamation rather than as an explanation. To a person who is basically conversant with human nature, Vicki's actions reflect, among other things, what we know about the evolutionary function of kin selection, which "became fixed in our genetic heritage because this mechanism encouraged behaviors for assisting in the survival of those individuals who (by their kinship to the helper) carried genes for helping relatives" (Rue 11). Kin selection helps to explain cooperation among family members, but why kin selection occurs at all has more to do with what Richard Dawkins calls the "selfish gene," the nature of which is "to get more numerous in the gene pool" (88). Dawkins would likely point out that while Vicki's actions appear to exemplify individual altruism, the act itself was "brought about by gene selfishness." Vicki and her little sister Carol share DNA (what Dawkins describes as *replicas*), which means that Vicki is some sense protecting her own genetic material when she "saves" her sister. This is not a privileged or romantic view: Rather, it is honest and realistic.

Obviously there is more to all of this, *much more*, but *that* is -- and has been -- exactly my point. This attitude and method of inquiry stand in sharp contrast to the religious interpretation, which does not even begin to explain what was *really* happening when the dog attacked, or when Vicki saved her sister. In fact, the religious interpretation ignores explanation altogether: the miraculous is, by definition, a denial of the knowable world. The message here is that when a human animal does what comes natural to it, it is deemed a miracle, but that when the dog does what *its* nature dictates it is not only unmiraculous, it is destroyed. At the very end of article, Susan Carroll -- in a moral-of-the-story fashion -- quotes detective Pat Scheider as saying "There's a good possibility the dog may have to be put down." I think it's telling that the article does not even hint at *human* culpability. The article implies that the dog is to blame, but in reality if anyone is to blame it is Carol Nunez's mother, Dorthy. As an adult human, she *has* the ability to inform her offspring of the potential hazards associated with dogs and their food. Dogs do not possess our range of cognitive abilities and behavioral options; they do not *decide* to bite, they just *bite* under certain circumstances. It might be said that the circumstances decide for them. For although much of the *wild* has been bred out of most breeds of domestic dog, many breeds still retain remnants of their wolf heritage, and if a wolf did not bite, it would starve or die and thus disappear from the gene pool.

Given this ancestry, *we can predict* that some domestic dogs are likely to bite under certain circumstances, such as those faced by wolves in their environment. As humans, *we can and do know this about dogs*. In order for the dog to be "responsible" in the way that the article implies it is, the dog would have to act on the prediction --

in short, would have to *know* -- that not all human mothers warn their children to be careful around dogs that are eating. This "logic" is, of course, insane, and yet nowhere in the article does Susan Carroll offer information that would refute it. The article is more interested in fostering the notion of human ascendancy than it is with providing information that has actual relevance to reality and is useful regardless of one's religion. A privileged view of human life prevents us from knowing the world we inhabit, and that ignorance prevents us from knowing each other and ourselves.

Still, there is no denying that Susan Carroll's story is important to people who subscribe to the Nunez's belief system, and that it reaffirms *their* ideas of how things are and which things matter. When placed in the larger context of the evolutionary paradigm, however, this account and others like it seem oddly paradoxical: by contributing to social cohesion and cooperation, major story traditions helped certain groups of individuals survive. But because these same stories do not acknowledge humanity's place in and dependence on the actual world, they are like the songs mariners sing when their ships are sinking. Far from facilitating survival, major story traditions now threaten it. Rue describes these traditions as "contingent caricatures. . .the imaginative constructions of ancient cultures, developed in response to particular challenges of the distant past and expressed in the concepts and categories of primitive cosmologies" (35). The world and what we know about it has changed and deepened, but many of our stories do not reflect these changes. These accounts are therefore irrelevant to all except the individuals and groups who support them, hence their contingency and, finally, their limitation.

This brings us back to the question of what constitutes useful information. If I believe what social constructionists tell me, then useful information is relative to the group that generates and shares it. But as Susan Carroll's article clearly shows, information that ignores biological fact isn't really useful beyond the parameters of one's subjective worldview. Only when this *proximate* information is examined in the context of the evolutionary paradigm does it become *ultimately* useful, which means that *all* humans, owing to our shared biological nature, may benefit from it. Equally important is that this new definition of usefulness extends to nonhuman nature as well. Thus, when seen from an ecocentric perspective, the limitations of subjective accounts of existence are clarified but dissolved. What remains is an awareness of a biotic sense of responsibility and relatedness. Rue writes:

As we discipline ourselves to take a wider view we begin to appreciate that the overlaps among species are much more profound and important than the differences. From the outer space of a Darwinian perspective life is a unity, a community of shared interest in the conditions of viability, apart from which there is no enduring promise. The driving theme of everybody's story is to understand these ultimate conditions and to value them ultimately. (106)

By emphasizing how organisms overlap, and by valuing what all organisms share -- i.e., conditions of viability -- the evolutionary perspective provides and encourages a foundation for biotic equanimity.

This brings us to the fundamental difference between the poststructuralist and evolutionary perspective of the postmodern emphasis on multiculturalism. Foucault's relativistic view of the episteme is useful to the extent that it describes how individuals and groups of people generate knowledge, but because it does not recognize how that narrative reflects and is informed by our biological or shared human nature, ultimately the theory does little more than maintain the status quo. In other words, what does it matter that individuals and groups of people construct knowledge differently if at the end of the day they are still killing each other and using Earth as a battleground *because of that knowledge* ? How can knowing how people construct knowledge ever *really* be meaningful *and* useful to a person or a group of people who are equally fervent about their *own* beliefs? Will Osama's god ever seem plausible to Boykin? Will the dominant narrative ever speak to the needs of everyone else? Will the pre-Darwinian view of life inspire the preservation and protection of the global environment?

Offering his own brand of poststructuralism, Kenneth Gergen would likely see this disparity as evidence of how the self, due to its exposure to a multiplicity of voices, is in danger of becoming amorphous, lost: "Critical to my argument is the proposal that social saturation brings with it a general loss in our assumption of true and

knowable selves" (16). But what Gergen sees as a threat to the self, I see as evidence of it: the many stories of the world behave as *expressions* of a universal nature that is knowable through scientific inquiry. Thus, it's not that Gergen knows something about the substance of the self that scientists don't. It's that he regards science as subject to the subjective vagaries of cultural relativism. He writes:

. . .the emerging multiplicity in perspectives is undermining longstanding beliefs about truth and objectivity. Many now see science as a sea of social opinion, the tides of which are often governed by political and ideological forces. And as science becomes not a reflection of the world but a reflection of social process, attention is removed from the "world as it is" and centers instead on representations of the world. (16)

John Alcock, Regents' Professor of Biology at Arizona State University, deals with these relativist claims in his book *The Triumph of Sociobiology*. There he points out that the claim that Truth and Reality can never be approximated is really an intellectual dead-end because it is indefensible by the relativists' own standards: the relativist perspective ". . .might be right, it might be wrong, it might be -- but who cares?"(83). Alcock's exasperated tone here is understandable, particularly since so much of what we know about ourselves and the world we live in is because of science. Once he has established the nature, relevance, and veracity of sociobiology -- a science that "explores the effects of the social environment on behavioral evolution" (9) -- Alcock revisits this point in more concrete terms:

Moreover, one cannot brush [sociobiology] to one side with social constructionist claims that scientists operate in a social context, which is somehow supposed to make it impossible to validate scientific findings. Scientific conclusions rest upon the impeccable logic of the procedures that are used to test all manner of potential explanations, procedures that are the foundation for every successful technological innovation in our world. (218)

I imagine cultural relativists would be hard pressed to explain how it's possible to accept scientific understanding as it pertains to technological innovations, but then to dismiss its relevance to the rest of life. Gergen himself seemed primed to recognize that science is by far the most reliable means of establishing Truth and Reality. In his 1985 article "The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Psychology" he concedes that ". . .although casting doubt on the process of objective warranting, constructionism *offers no alternative truth criteria*" [italics mine] (272). Of course it doesn't, and how could it? It is precisely this indeterminacy that makes social constructionism so utterly removed from the very real challenges facing modern humans.

Granted, Gergen would elaborate on his views five years later in *The Saturated Self*, but with equally indeterminate (and ultimately regressive) results: "We sense a loss of valued traditions, and this very consciousness can serve as the impetus for cultural restoration. We must get back to the basics, it is said, and the basics lie within our own character" (206). Basics? Character? What do these words really mean in the context of cultural relativism? What *can* they mean? Is it possible for us to agree? But notice what happens to this relativistic stranglehold when these same words are placed in the context of biology. Volumes of verifiable information become available to us, and what this information inevitably reveals is that biology, as the study of life and organisms, reaffirms the universal importance of viability, and those conditions most favorable to ensuring what Rue calls the "ultimate good -- that is, life" (101).

In spite of humanity's delusions to the contrary, we face a time of unparalleled environmental and social stress. This tells me that our current narratives, whether ideological or religious, have failed. Admittedly, we *will* privilege certain knowledge, but if humanity aims to transcend the limits of the status quo and thereby repair social ills, the knowledge we privilege must be based on what we verifiably know about human and biotic interdependence. Glen Love observes this issue in the Afterword of his book *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment*, and his argument is my own:

My contention is that Darwinian evolutionary theory offers the truest basis with which to deal with the perils and opportunities of being human, as that awareness affects not only our work as teachers and scholars, but also our relationship with the nature which binds us to life on this decreasingly commodious sphere. (165)

Now is the time to tell the story of all time. To this end, poststructuralism has done all it can ever do, as have the majority of the manifold narratives it seeks to privilege. Make no mistake, social constructionists and environmental realists want the same thing: to find common ground. But let us do so in the most realistic, sustainable, and inclusive way possible: Let us begin by looking beneath our feet.

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