

**JOHN F. KENNEDY-INSTITUT  
FÜR NORDAMERIKASTUDIEN**

**ABTEILUNG FÜR KULTUR**

**Working Paper No. 130/2002**

**ISSN 0948-9436**

**Walter Benn Michaels**

*Posthistoricism*

**Copyright © 2002 by Walter Benn Michaels**

**University of Illinois at Chicago, USA**

Walter Benn Michaels

## POSTHISTORICISM\*

### *The End of History*

What ended when, in 1989 in Moscow, history ended? One answer – at least in part, the right answer – is that the Cold War ended. But even those most elated by the "victory" of the U.S. over the U.S.S.R. didn't think that the end of the Cold War meant the end of history and, for Francis Fukuyama, the rapid decline and (as it turned out) fall of the Soviet Union was only symptomatic of the real victory, which had already taken place at least by 1988 and which he noticed when he read a speech by Mikhail Gorbachev describing "the essence of socialism" as "competition."<sup>1</sup> If the essence of socialism was now being described as competition, then socialism, at least according to its leaders, was turning into capitalism. So it was not the end of the Soviet Union's challenge to the United States that ended history; it was the end of socialism's challenge to liberal capitalism. What ended when history ended, according to Fukuyama, was fundamental disagreement over the ideal mode of social organization. The "triumph of the West," Fukuyama argued, was the triumph of "the Western **idea**,"<sup>2</sup> liberal democracy; insofar as the failure of communism left no plausible alternatives to liberal democracy as an **idea**, insofar, that is, as it might be imagined that no one was any longer arguing for the theoretical superiority of socialism to capitalism, what might properly be called ideological conflict was over. And, although Fukuyama's thesis was met with instantaneous and overwhelming skepticism and, although it is perfectly obvious that conflict (both in the U.S. and abroad) hardly ended when history did, there is an obvious sense also in which both the skepticism and the continuing conflict tended to be understood in ways that confirmed Fukuyama's thesis.<sup>3</sup>

Thus Arthur Schlesinger Jr. began his 1991 polemic against multiculturalism, *The Disuniting of America*, with the remark that "The fading away of the cold war has brought an era of ideological conflict to an end. But it has not, as forecast, brought an end to history"<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, because the "disappearance of ideological competition in the third world removes superpower restraints on national and tribal confrontations," the world was now a

---

\* A little more than half the following essay has already been published – in somewhat different form – in the journals, *Transition*, *New Literary History* and *Critical Inquiry*.

1 Francis Fukuyama, "Second Thoughts," *The National Interest* (Summer 1999), 16.

2 Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" in *The New Shape of World Politics*, ed. with an intro. by Fareed Zakaria (New York, 1997), 1. "The End of History?" was originally published in *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1989) but subsequent references to it (and to Samuel Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations?" (also originally published in *Foreign Affairs* [Summer 1993]) are to this edition.

3 It might be added that the very recent (at the time of this writing) redeployment of the example of the Cold War in the form of the war against terrorism also makes sense along Fukuyama's lines, not only because terrorism, unlike socialism, is not an ideology but because the idea that the terrorism might be motivated by an ideology is denied by a discourse that understands the terrorists only as criminals, motivated at only by a "perversion" of an ideology (Islam) or essentially unmotivated: i.e., "evil."

4 Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (New York, 1991), 9.

"more dangerous" place than before. Schlesinger's point was not just that the superpowers no longer policed the third world – he had almost no interest in the third world – but that the ideological victory of the west made possible "confrontations" that were no longer themselves ideological and that were just as likely to take place in the first and second worlds as they were in the third. Without communism to hold it together, such confrontations had destroyed the Soviet Union; what *The Disuniting of America* worried about was what, without capitalism (since everybody was a capitalist now) would hold the United States together. And if it was only because communism has ceased to be a problem that multiculturalism, as Schlesinger saw it, had become one, it was only because communism had also ceased to be a solution that multiculturalism could, in its own eyes, become that too. Both Schlesinger and his opponents, that is, shared Fukuyama's sense of the new irrelevance of ideological struggle; in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (published, like *The Disuniting of America*, in 1991 and representing that disuniting literally as a revolution of "the indigenous peoples of the Americas" against their European conquerors), the revolution is led by Indians who explicitly dissociate it from any "political party" or marxist "ideology."<sup>5</sup> ("The Indians couldn't care less about international Marxism." [326]) In fact, in as dramatic a repudiation of the ideal of communism as Fukuyama could have imagined, Silko's Indians execute the Cuban Marxist who has been sent to help them organize. Tired of being instructed in marxist doctrine and tired, in particular, of hearing Comrade Bartolomeo criticize their own "tribalism" as "'the whore of nationalism and the dupe of capitalism'" (526), they hang him.

Fukuyama called such non-Marxist conflicts "post-historical." They could, as Schlesinger feared and Silko hoped, pose a threat to the U.S. but they posed no threat to liberal capitalism. Only Marxism could do this because only Marxism challenged liberal capitalism's status as an ideal, its understanding of itself as a social system without "fundamental" contradictions and so immune in principle to the supersession that had overtaken previous social systems. According to Marx, insofar as capitalism was based on a class structure, it necessarily produced inequality and conflict, and thus contained within itself the seeds of its own transformation into something else – communism. So capitalism's ability to outlast communism proved, Fukuyama wrote, that Marx was wrong; there is no "fundamental contradiction" in capitalism, "the class issue has been successfully resolved" (11), and, in fact, "the egalitarianism of modern America" – precisely because it "represents the essential achievement of the classless society envisioned by Marx" – represents the end of contradiction and the end of history.

The crucial claim here is that "the class issue" has been "resolved" because it is only if that claim was true that the Marxist critique of capitalism could be dismissed. Marx argued that capitalism itself was inevitably producing the contradiction that would destroy it, and this is what Fukuyama denied. In denying it, he didn't need to say that actually existing capitalism had solved the problem of economic inequality – and indeed he didn't say it: he does not say that "there are not rich people and poor people in the United States, or that the gap between them has not grown in recent years." What he does say is that "the root causes of economic inequality do not have to do with the underlying legal and social structure of our society." In actually existing capitalism, in other words, there are inequalities, but capitalism does not in principle require such inequalities and does not itself

---

5 Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York, 1991), 513.

cause them. At the end of history, there will be no such inequalities; insofar as we have already arrived at the end of history, their persistence must thus be understood not as "the inherent product of liberalism" but as "the historical legacy of premodern conditions."

What this means is that Marxism was wrong in describing capitalism as a class system, and that what look to the Marxist like class differences produced by capitalism are in fact differences between "groups" inherited from essentially pre-capitalist and pre-liberal stages of history. Thus, for example, "black poverty in the United States is not the inherent product of liberalism, but is rather the 'legacy of slavery and racism' which persisted long after the formal abolition of slavery." Blacks, on this analysis, do not belong to an economic class whose exploitation is a function of "the social structure of our society" (if they did, then Marx would be right and liberal capitalism, as historically dominant as it has become, would not be the culmination of history); they belong instead to a "group" whose "cultural and social characteristics" are an "historical legacy." And the principles of capitalism will eventually make those characteristics – and the groups they define – disappear.

The defeat of Marxism, then, is only incidentally the defeat of actually existing socialism and the triumph of actually existing liberalism; it is essentially the defeat of the idea of Marxism, and what this means in Fukuyama is the defeat of the Marxist idea of the class struggle and, indeed, of the Marxist idea of class. Whatever Fukuyama's "groups" are, they aren't classes, and when, in Silko, "the people" execute the Cuban Marxist Bartolomeo, they are not a class either. Indeed, it is precisely because the Cuban keeps insisting on the primacy of economic analysis and keeps refusing to acknowledge the relevance of the Indians' historical struggles (he won't listen to their five hundred year chronology of European oppression and Indian resistance) that the revolutionaries feel compelled to get rid of him. "Comrade Bartolomeo ... has no use for indigenous history. Comrade Bartolomeo denies the holocaust of indigenous Americans" (531). What Silko calls "crimes against history" are crimes against the "people" because, in Silko, the "people" are as little a product of the economy and as much a product of history as Fukuyama's "groups," which is to say that both Silko and Fukuyama are anti-marxist insofar as they both regard present inequalities as a function not of contemporary liberal capitalism but of events that are themselves historical. But where Fukuyama wants to get rid of the historical legacy, Silko wants to reclaim it. In Fukuyama, it is history, not capitalism, that victimizes blacks – hence Marx was wrong; in Silko, it is history, not socialism, that will redeem the Indians – hence Comrade Bartolomeo must die.

But if, in liberalism, the "people" are neither an ideological entity nor an economic one, what are they? They cannot be an ideological entity because, with the defeat of Marxism, one people cannot be distinguished from another people on the basis of ideology – properly ideological differences no longer exist. They cannot be an economic entity because, with the defeat of Marxism, the Marxist characterization of liberal capitalism's constituent element as the class has been discredited – the differences that matter are only incidentally economic. It might then be imagined that the triumph of liberalism makes the differences between peoples irrelevant; this is the view that Michael Lind, in a book called *The Next American Nation* (1995) attributed to those whom he called "democratic universalists," among whom he would have counted Fukuyama himself. But, Lind insisted that Americans were "a single people" (260), different as a people from other peoples, and,

as Schlesinger and Silko make clear, the real effect of the end of history had not been to get rid of difference but to transform it, to replace the differences between what people think (ideology) and the differences between what people own (class) with the differences between what people are (identity). Only at the end of history could all politics become identity politics.

So although in *Almanac of the Dead*, "communists" are replaced by "tribal people" (481), Silko's revolutionary Indian heroine is as vehement in her admiration for Marx "the man" as she is in her denunciation of marxism the ideology: "Marxism is one thing! Marx *the man* is another" (519). Marx the man is a "tribal man" – "Marx of the Jews, tribal people of the desert" (520). Marx the marxist taught that men belonged to classes; Marx "the tribal Jew" himself belongs to a race. Preferring Marx to Marxism, Silko prefers race and the appreciation of ethnic difference to class and the elimination of economic difference<sup>6</sup>. That's why the revolution she envisions involves not the workers of the world but its "indigenous people" rising up to take back their "ancestral land." Although indigenous is as much a geographical as it is a biological term, the very idea of the struggle between the indigenous armies of the Americas and those whom Silko calls the "Europeans" suggests its racial implications; after all, none of the Europeans was actually born in Europe. And when the "all-tribal people's army" makes plans to offer deserters from the U.S. army "safe conduct to Oslo or Stockholm" (590-91), "indigenous" emerges in its completely racialized form; only if indigenouness is genetic can some people born in the Americas count as native and other people born in the Americas count as Nordic.

Silko, then, is committed to a more or less straightforward ethnonationalism. But such a position is hardly available to a writer like Schlesinger (for whom tribal is a pejorative epithet) or to a writer like Lind (who explicitly looks forward to the elimination of racial difference through miscegenation). Schlesinger and Lind are nationalists not ethnonationalists; indeed, what Lind calls "liberal nationalism" is defined by its difference from and opposition to ethnonationalism: "Liberal nationalism," Lind writes, rejects "race as the basis of nationality" (286). And, defending his own idea of "a unique American identity" (19), Schlesinger explicitly separates that identity from race and appeals instead to Gunnar Myrdal's formulation of "the American Creed," to "the ideals of the essential dignity and equality of all human beings, of inalienable rights to freedom, justice, and opportunity," ideals held "in common," as Myrdal put it, by Americans "of all national origins, regions, creeds, and colors" (27).

Whatever the ultimate value of the American Creed may be, however, it is obviously inadequate for the purpose of establishing "a unique American identity," since, in turning away from race and toward "ideals," it escapes ethnonationalism but only at the price of escaping nationalism as well. For even if we were to imagine that the ideals of the essential dignity and equality of all human beings had originated in America or were more prevalent in America, we would still not have any reason to think that there was something distinctively American about either the ideals or the belief in them. Indeed, the ideals themselves are obviously universalist; more important, the belief in them is also universalist,

---

6 When difference is understood on the model of race, the point will always be to respect it rather than, as Marxists seek to do with class, eliminate it. Thus, for example, what Howard Winant calls a truly "radical democracy" will attack racism by "accept[ing] and celebrat[ing]" "racial difference" (*Racial Conditions* [Minneapolis, 1994]), 31.

which is to say, the very characterization of them as ideals is universalist. To believe in these ideas is to believe that they are true for everyone and that everyone should believe them – since Russians, like Americans, **have** inalienable rights to dignity and equality, Russians, like Americans, should believe in those rights. In fact, insofar as the end of the cold war (at least as Fukuyama understands it) means that the Russians **have** come to believe in them (and the end of history means that **everyone** has come to believe in them), the distinctiveness (the Americanness) of the American Creed has disappeared. With respect to the question of American identity, the Creed can now be seen for what it really is – an ideology, not a source of identity at all.

This is why Lind, whose book is subtitled *The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution*, rejects notions like that of the American Creed and argues that "the very notion of a country based on an idea is absurd" (3). It's absurd not (or, at least, not only) for psychological reasons but for logical ones: "What if two countries are founded on the same idea?" Lind asks, "Does that mean they are the same country?" (5). Lind dismisses the view that American identity might be anchored in a set of ideas like the American Creed as "democratic universalism"; what is required, he realizes, is a conception of identity that, if it is not biological, is not ideological either. And he finds this where Schlesinger too eventually finds it. For if Schlesinger begins *The Disuniting of America* by announcing his allegiance to the ideals of the American Creed, he ends it by transforming those ideals, altering not their content but their status, their ideality. For, in the wake of "the conflict of ideologies," the crucial thing about people, as we have already seen, is not what they believe but who they are. Thus the crucial thing about America is that it is "a transformative nation with an identity all its own" (16) – the post-historical struggle is to maintain this identity. The new conflict is not, in other words, between "the American Creed" (what Americans believe) and some other creed (what other people believe) but between American national identity and other identities, between what Schlesinger now calls "our own culture" and "other cultures" (136). Creed becomes culture; the "real American nation," as Lind puts it, is "the cultural nation."

Even beyond the American context, the allure in posthistoricism of a world organized by cultures can hardly be overstated. "The great divisions among mankind and the dominating source of conflict" in the 21st century, the political scientist Samuel Huntington predicted in "The Clash of Civilizations" in 1993, "will be cultural." "A civilization," he says, is "the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have, short of that which distinguishes humans from other species" (69). Huntington, of course, is not interested in what distinguishes humans from other species; what made this essay well-known was its claim that "world politics is entering a new phase" (67), the phase in which, as we have already noted, "cultural" difference will be the major source of conflict. But the wording of his definition of "civilization," with its suggestion that not only the differences between humans but also the differences between humans and "other species" are essentially cultural, suggests both the importance of culture as the source of conflict and, more generally, its importance as the site of difference. Huntington divides the world into "seven or eight major civilizations" ("Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic," etc.) But even in texts devoted to imagining "others" a good deal more other than Huntington's Confucians and Muslims, even, that is, in those texts where the other **is** imagined as belonging to a different species, the idea that otherness is

essentially cultural has seemed increasingly persuasive. In the *Ender Quartet* (by Orson Scott Card), for example, the new xenologists who have replaced the old anthropologists still do work the anthropologists would have recognized as their own: they study the "culture" of three foot tall aliens who look a little like pigs with hands until they metamorphose at maturity into trees.<sup>7</sup> And while they're studying "piggy culture," the xenologists worry about whether the very act of studying the culture will "contaminate" it. Understood, then, as the study of culture rather than as the study of man, anthropology is unaltered by its transformation into xenology. But, of course, the idea that the differences between humans and others can now be thought on the model of the differences between humans and humans means that many other things **are** altered. Which is only to say that, whether or not Huntington is right about the details, about how many cultures there are and about how to describe them, once creatures who look like pigs and turn into trees are understood above all as **culturally** different from humans, then what Huntington calls a "new world" definitely is being created.

Science fiction, of course, is relevant here because science fiction would seem to be almost generically committed to non-cultural, i.e. physical difference. The otherness of the alien is the otherness of its body and, in fact, this insistence on the physical difference between human and alien may be deployed not only against the Huntington-style idea that differences are essentially cultural but also against the idea that the differences between humans – insofar as what matters is physical difference – are in any way important. In Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy, human beings of different races are forcefully reminded of the irrelevance of their phenotypical differences by the fact that they are being asked to breed with aliens who look like sea slugs with limbs and tentacles. The difference between black and white skin looks pretty insignificant compared to the difference between humans and walking mollusks. Butler herself is African-American, as is Lilith, the chief human character of the trilogy, but from this perspective it might be argued that one of the points of the trilogy is to render racial difference irrelevant or, more generally, by dramatizing the difference between humans and aliens, to render all differences between humans irrelevant. Perhaps we could say that in science fiction the choice between imagining aliens as physically different from humans and imagining them as culturally different from humans should be understood as a choice between ways of imagining not the difference between humans and aliens but the difference between humans. To insist that the difference between humans and aliens is physical is to insist on the insignificance of differences between humans; to insist that the difference between humans and aliens is cultural is to insist on the importance of differences between humans. The primacy of culture in Card might thus be identified with a commitment to diversity; the indifference to culture in Butler might be identified with indifference to diversity.

But if, not only in science fiction and anthropology but in almost all recent discussions of essentialist versus social constructionist theorizations of difference, the relevant alternative to cultural difference is physical difference, in Huntington the alternative to culture is not bodies but ideologies. When "The Clash of Civilizations?" was published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993, it drew a greater response, as Huntington himself happily remarks, than any essay that journal had published since George Kennan's anonymous article of

---

7 Orson Scott Card, *Speaker for the Dead* (New York, 1986), 3. The other volumes of the quartet are *Ender's Game*, *Xenocide* and *Children of the Mind*.

1947. And, of course, the reference to Kennan is relevant in ways that go beyond the merely self-congratulatory since, if Kennan may be said to have announced the beginning of what would come to be the Cold War, "The Clash of Civilizations" was one of the series of essays (Fukuyama's "The End of History?" is the prototype) that proclaimed its end. In fact, it is the end of the Cold War that makes Huntington's "new phase" new. Kennan had insisted on "the innate antagonism between capitalism and Socialism" as a concept essential to the Soviet Union's hostility to the U.S.;<sup>8</sup> in posthistoricist discourse, as we have already seen, the disappearance of the Soviet Union marks the end of that antagonism, which is to say, the end not merely of the antagonism between two countries but of the antagonism between two social ideals. "With the Cold War over," Huntington says, "cultural commonalities increasingly overcome ideological differences," and the differences that remain are precisely not ideological; "the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological ... The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural" (67). It is not the replacement of **physical** by cultural difference but rather the replacement of **ideological** by cultural difference that marks the coming of the new world.

From this perspective, the question of whether differences are physical or cultural – a question that has, as I have noted, been at the center of recent debates between essentialist and anti-essentialist accounts of identity – begins to look secondary. Huntington, in fact, tends to treat the cultural as if it were physical, as if the "characteristics" of one's culture were like the "characteristics" of one's body, "less mutable" than one's "politics and economics."

In class and ideological conflicts, the key question was "Which side are you on?" and people could and did choose sides and change sides. In conflicts between civilizations, the question is "What are you?" That is a given that can't be changed (71).

The idea that what you are is "a given that can't be changed" would, of course, be anathema to those anti-essentialists who insist that identity ("what you are") is performative – the whole point of its being performative is that it can be changed. At the same time, however, it would be a mistake to imagine that Huntington's opposition between the cultural and the ideological would be undone by the recognition that the relative fixity of the cultural is only relative, that cultural identities are, as we say, more "mobile" than he recognizes. For the difference between what can and can't (so easily) be changed is only symptomatic of a more powerful difference, the difference between ideology and identity. And, as I shall argue, the commitment to the idea that identities are not fixed in no way undermines this difference; the debate over whether identities are fixed, like the debate over whether differences are cultural or physical, should be understood instead as a way of propping it up, as a way of insisting on the primacy of identity – physical or cultural, fixed or mobile – over ideology. To choose between physical and cultural, fixed or mobile (or, we might add in anticipation, between pure and hybrid) is to choose between two different accounts of identity. And to choose between two different accounts of identity is already to have chosen identity itself.

---

8 George Kennan as Mr. "X", "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* 25 (July 1947), 567.

## *Political Science Fictions*

This choice involves what might be described as the disarticulation of difference from disagreement. From the posthistoricalist perspective, what looks distinctive about the Cold War is precisely that it linked difference to disagreement. Indeed, the early and continuous characterization of the enmity between the United States and the Soviet Union as predominantly "ideological," as something more than and different from the enmity of two great powers, insists on the importance of disagreement.<sup>9</sup> Insofar as the differences between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were understood not simply as the differences between powers but as the differences between social systems (as a disagreement over the relative merits of capitalism and communism), the question of whether or not you were a communist (the question of what your political beliefs were) could function independent of the question of whether you were an American (the question of what your identity was). The Cold War, in other words, could be understood to make identity irrelevant – what mattered (in Huntington's terms) was never who you were but only which side you were on. When Huntington describes the middle of the 20th century (from the end of World War One to the end of the Cold War) as a period in which "the conflict of nations yielded to the conflict of ideologies" (68), he identifies not only a political but also a theoretical shift: conflicting nations assert the importance of their interests; conflicting ideologies assert the truth of their views.

It is in this sense that the Cold War may be (and often was) described as universalizing, as involving every part of the world and potentially every part of the universe. The point is not merely the geopolitical one that the two countries involved were so powerful that their spheres of influence more or less blanketed the world. The point is rather the logical one that the question as to which of two social systems is **better** is intrinsically universal: the belief that private ownership of property is unjust has no particular geographical application; to prefer communism (or capitalism) is to prefer it everywhere for everyone. A notion like sphere of influence, by contrast, can only be local (even if the locale is very large) and hence strategic; we didn't dispute the (former) U.S.S.R.'s predominance in the countries that bordered it precisely because they bordered it. Conflicts where ideology seems irrelevant – conflicts that can be explained by appeal to differing interests instead of differing ideologies – need make no appeal to anything beyond strategy. But, in the context of ideological dispute, this strategic suspension of the question of which is the superior social system is **only** strategic – if capitalism is superior to communism, it is just as superior in (and hence desirable for) Poland (and Poles) as it is in the U.S. for Americans.

Ideological conflicts are universal, in other words, precisely because, unlike conflicts of interest, they involve disagreement, and it is the mere possibility of disagreement that is universalizing. We do not disagree about what we want – we just want different things; we disagree about what is true, regardless of what we want. Indeed, it is only the idea that something that is true must be true for everyone that makes disagreement between anyone

---

9 I don't mean to suggest here that the Cold War was invariably thought of as ideological; indeed, as my discussion below of the imagination of nuclear holocaust indicates, I don't believe that it was. But, although sustained attention to the representation of conflict the period itself would doubtless reveal some fascinating variations, my focus in this essay is only on representations of Cold War conflict at what was announced as its end.

make sense. Posthistoricist thinkers often criticize the appeal to universality as an attempt to compel agreement and they remind us of the "ethnocentric biases" that such appeals conceal; after all, "standards of universality" are themselves only local.<sup>10</sup> But, of course, the fact that people have locally different views about what is universally true in no way counts as a criticism of the universality of the true. Just the opposite; the reason that we cannot appeal to universal truths as grounds for adjudicating our disagreements is just because the idea of truth's universality is nothing but a consequence of our disagreement. The universal does not compel our agreement, it is implied by our disagreement; and we invoke the universal not to resolve our disagreement but to explain the fact that we disagree.

The alternative to difference of opinion is difference in point of view (or perspective or subject position). The point of the appeal to perspective is that it eliminates disagreement – to see things differently because we see from different perspectives (through different eyes, from different places) is to see the same thing differently but without contradiction – if I see something from the front and think that it looks black and you think it looks white from the back, we do not disagree. More radically, if we understand different perspectives not merely as seeing the same thing from different points of view but as constituting different objects, as seeing **different** things, then there is still no disagreement – I see a white thing and you see a (different) black thing. This was the point of Stanley Fish's insistence in *Is There a Text in This Class?* that readers who found themselves with very different interpretations of a poem like *Lycidas* might begin to think that they "could not possibly be reading the same poem" and that they would be "right": "each ... would be reading the poem he had made."<sup>11</sup> The difference between interpretation here becomes a difference between the objects of interpretation, and the difference between the objects of interpretation is accounted for by reference to the difference between the subjects who are doing the interpreting. So just as difference as disagreement makes the subject position of the observer irrelevant (since to disagree with someone is to produce a judgment that, if it is true is true also for the person with whom you disagree – that's why we think of ourselves as disagreeing), difference without disagreement makes the subject position essential (since to differ without disagreeing is nothing more than to occupy a different position).

And this essentializing of the subject position does not depend on any account of that position which might be called essentialist. It has nothing to do with the question of what determines the subject position (race, culture, sex, gender); it has to do only with the relevance of the subject position, however determined. You don't, in other words, need to belong to a race or a sex for your subject position to be crucial – two opposing players in any game differ without disagreeing. The conflict in a game involves the question not of who is right but of who will win; what matters in a game is not what you believe to be true

---

10 Thus Judith Butler comments on the difficulty of grounding "a theory or politics" in a "subject position which is 'universal,' when the very category of the universal has only begun to be exposed for its own highly ethnocentric biases" (*Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. by Judith Butler and Joan Scott [New York, 1992], 7). There are two mistakes here, or perhaps two versions of the same mistake: the universal cannot function as a ground (even the "permanently open, permanently contested, permanently contingent" [8] ground that Butler hopes for) and it is not a kind of subject position. Universality cannot be invoked to ground our theories because the claim to universality is built into the very possibility of having a theory, and, rather than being a kind of subject position, it marks the irrelevance of the subject position – to disagree with someone is to think that the truth or falsehood of our theory has nothing to do with the fact that it is ours.

11 Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class* (Cambridge, 1980), 169.

but which side you're on. (This is why the question of intention is irrelevant with respect to playing a game in a way that it never is with respect to speech acts; no one cares what you **meant** by immobilizing your opponent's king, they just care that you did it).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the model of the game undoes Huntington's opposition between the question of which side you're on and the question of what you are. If, on the Cold War model, the question of which side you're on is answered by what you think is true (rather than what you are), on the posthistoricist model, the question of which side you're on can only be a question about what you are. Indeed, the whole point of posthistoricism – the whole point, that is, of the commitment to difference – is to understand all differences as differences in what we are and thus to make it seem that the fundamental question – the question that separates the post-ideological left from the post-ideological right – is the question of our attitude toward difference: the left wants to celebrate difference, the right wants to overcome it.

Wherever we want to locate ourselves on this axis, however (and it is by now no doubt obvious that the point of this book is to attack the axis not to argue for one or another position along it), we can see that the movement from the clash of ideologies to the clash of civilizations should be understood as a movement from the universalist logic of conflict as difference of opinion to the posthistoricist logic of conflict as difference in subject position. From this perspective, the rise in the U.S. of racial and cultural difference as emblems of difference **as such** might be understood as a rehearsal for the end of ideological difference. And science fiction which (with its reconfiguration of the racial other as the alien other) undermines racial difference as an empirical phenomenon, must nevertheless be understood to assert its priority as a theoretical model. Thus on the one hand, as we have already noted, the contrast with the alien makes the differences between humans look absolutely trivial. The heroine of *Xenogenesis* is African-American, and its cast of human characters (Asian, Latino, white) meets most current standards of diversity, but the differences in human skin colors and hair textures may be rendered insignificant (made to look like differences in, say, height and weight) when the humans are juxtaposed with talking, tentacled sea slugs.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, the confrontation between human and alien seems designed to dispel the notion that the physical differences between humans – the difference between races – could be crucial. On the other hand, the contrast with the alien makes physical difference uniquely relevant, since the defining difference between humans and aliens is the difference in their bodies. Thus although Butler's *Xenogenesis* is **relatively** uninterested in both the categories of difference – racial and cultural – that have tended to dominate the field of posthistoricist conflict, it is **absolutely** uninterested in the categories

---

12 More generally, we might say that in a game like chess, we are only interested in peoples' intentions insofar as we are interested in the motives for their actions. But we don't think of the intended meaning of a speech act as the motive for the speech act. Perhaps the point could be put the other way around just by saying that the rules of a game have force but they don't have meaning.

13 Differences in height and weight are not, of course, intrinsically insignificant; in fact, for many purposes they are crucial. It is only with respect to the determination of identity that they don't matter. Which is why, absent some appeal to utility or aesthetics, no one is committed to appreciating differences of height and weight. Of course, in a society as committed to the production of identity as ours is, there have been efforts to treat these physical features along the lines of skin color and thus turn them into markers of identity. But, as I have argued elsewhere ("Autobiography of an Ex-White Man: Why Race is Not a Social Construction," *Transition*), identity on the model of race (or culture) requires that our bodies (or beliefs and actions) represent rather than constitute our identity, and while it's easy to see how having a certain skin color can represent (or misrepresent) your race, it's hard to see how the height you are can be thought of as representing (or misrepresenting) rather than simply determining your tallness.

of ideological difference that dominated the Cold War – capitalist and communist, liberal and Marxist.

Set in a period after humanity has almost completely destroyed itself in a nuclear war (the most characteristic of Cold War fantasies), *Xenogenesis* blames that war not on political struggle but on human nature, or, more precisely, on the fact that "human bodies" are "fatally flawed" because they have "a mismatched pair of genetic characteristics" that makes the species simultaneously "intelligent" and "hierarchical" and thus, as Butler describes it, doomed to commit "humanicide."<sup>14</sup> The point here is not Fukuyama's and Huntington's (that the end of the Cold War brought about the end of ideological struggle) but rather that there was no ideological struggle in the first place. The conflict between capitalism and communism was really just a conflict over who would rise to the top of the hierarchy; the disagreement about the merits of private property was really just a competition over who could get the most of it. If the post-modern critique of the universal turns Fukuyama's and Huntington's historical account of the end of disagreement into a theoretical account of the impossibility of disagreement, science fiction like Butler's turns their history into biology.

In texts like *Xenogenesis* and *Xenocide*, then, the fundamental differences are between humans and aliens, and the fundamental questions are not about how society should be organized but about whether the different species (or, alternatively and inconsequentially, different cultures) can survive.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, one might say that the replacement of ideology by bodies and cultures makes it inevitable that the only relevant question be the question of survival, which is why texts like *Xenogenesis* and *Xenocide* are called *Xenogenesis* and *Xenocide*. Because the transformation of ideological differences into cultural differences makes the differences themselves valuable, the politics of a world divided into cultures (a world where difference is understood as cultural) must be the politics of survival – a politics, in other words, where the worst thing that can happen will be a culture's death. Victory over the enemy on the Cold War model may be understood as the victory of good over evil – this is what the victory of the humans over the insect-like aliens called "buggers" looks like at the end of *Ender's Game*., the first volume of Card's series. But insofar as the enemy is redescribed not as people who disagree with us as to how society should be organized (communists) but as people who occupy different subject positions (aliens), the happy ending of their destruction must be redescribed too. By the beginning of the second novel in the *Ender* series (*Speaker for the Dead*), the very thing that made Ender a hero (destroying the enemy) has made him a villain (destroying an entire species). The ideological enemy has been rewritten as the physio-cultural other; all conflict has been reimagined on the model of the conflict between self and other.

And this is true whether the texts in question understand difference as essentially physical or as essentially cultural. It is for this reason that the essentialist/antiessentialist

---

14 Octavia Butler, *Dawn* (New York, 1987), 36-37, 6. The succeeding volumes of the trilogy are *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago*.

15 In this sense, there is something a little misleading about my description of nuclear holocaust fantasies as characteristic of the Cold War. It would be a more accurate to insist on a certain tension between that war and the technology that was imagined as its most likely end. For although the war might be understood to be about ideology, its nuclear climax would involve not the defeat of one ideology by another but the defeat of humanity itself, Butler's "humanicide." The nuclear scenario thus functions to make a war between ideologies into a war against humanity, against, that is, an identity.

debate in contemporary theory is so fundamental – not because the disagreements between the two positions are so fundamental but because their agreement is. What they agree on is the value of difference itself, a value created by turning disagreement into otherness. The dispute, in other words, between essentialism and anti-essentialism is only secondarily the expression of a dispute about whether difference is physical or cultural; it is primarily the expression of a consensus about the desirability of maintaining difference, of making sure that differences survive. If difference is physical, then what must survive are different species; if difference is cultural then it's cultural survival that matters. The point of both stories is that the happy end cannot be the victory of one species/culture over another.

The idea here is not merely that survival as such – whether it's the survival of the species or the survival of the culture – is valued. What the interchangeability of species and culture makes clear is rather the value of identities – it's identities that must survive – which is to say that it's not death but extinction that must be avoided. On Earth, this distinction is made vivid in contemporary imaginations of what are, in effect, non-violent genocides, as in, for example, the idea that current rates of intermarriage and assimilation doom American Jewry to destruction and thus constitute a second Holocaust. Intermarriage poses no threat to the people who intermarry, which is just to say that when someone like Alan Dershowitz worries about *The Vanishing American Jew*, he is worried not about people who are Jewish but about the identity that is their Jewishness. It is the identity not the people that is in danger of disappearing.<sup>16</sup> *Xenogenesis* dramatizes this distinction by inverting its terms: where Dershowitz's Jews are living happily ever after while their identity languishes, Butler's human "resisters" are risking their lives to make sure that their identity survives. In *Xenogenesis*, those humans who mate and reproduce with aliens are rendered virtually immortal by alien biotechnology, the "resisters" – who hide from the aliens and struggle to reproduce on their own – are crippled by disease and the threat of a very high rate of mortality. Because identity itself is imagined as valuable, the resisters are willing to die in order for their identity to live.

But the resisters are not the true heroes of *Xenogenesis*; in fact, the human desire to "stay human" may be more plausibly described as the object of the novel's critique than of its appreciation. "Human beings fear difference," a human mother tells her half-human half-alien son. But if the son has inherited the human fear of difference, he has inherited just the opposite from his alien ancestors: the Oankali, his mother tells him, "crave difference." In his own life, she predicts, he will experience some conflict between these emotions; when he does, she advises him, "try to go the Oankali way. Embrace difference."<sup>17</sup> *Xenogenesis* not only insists that all differences be understood as differences in subject position, as differences between what people want rather than what they believe, it makes difference itself the object of affect – the thing that is feared or craved, that is or isn't wanted. Huntington replaced the conflict between ideologies with the difference between identities; Butler seeks to replace the conflict between identities with the conflict between identity and difference.

---

16 Dershowitz tends to describe the difference as that between Jews "as *individuals*", who have never been better off, and Jews "as a *people*" who "have never been in greater danger" (*The Vanishing American Jew* [New York, 1997], 1), but this somewhat misrepresents his point. The relevant opposition is not between Jews as individuals and Jews as a group but between Jews and their Jewishness.

17 Octavia Butler, *Adulthood Rites* (New York, 1988), 80.

"Butler's fiction," Donna Haraway says, "is about resistance to the imperative to recreate the sacred image of the same."<sup>18</sup> Insofar as the "question of `differences,'" she writes in "The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies," "has destabilized humanist discourses of liberation based on a politics of identity and substantive unity" (211), the idea here is to replace that politics of identity with a politics of difference. In *Xenogenesis*, the difference between these politics is expressed in the debate over miscegenation. The "humanist" discourse is the discourse of those humans who fear difference and who thus refuse to mate with aliens; its replacement is the discourse of those humans who embrace difference by embracing aliens. Hence, not only does Butler insist on miscegenation as the privileged form of sexual activity, she makes incest the only alternative to it. The human children of human parents are crippled and disfigured by genetic disorders represented as the effects of inbreeding; the hybrid "constructs" produced by humans who mate with aliens are unimaginably healthy and beautiful. If the emergence of the alien – with different bodies rather than different ideas – eliminates ideology as the source of conflict, it replaces ideology with the differences between those bodies, between identities, between races or cultures, between aliens and humans. But while Huntington imagines that such differences make identitarian conflict inevitable, Butler's goal is to make it impossible. So in *Xenogenesis* it is not difference itself that is the source of conflict, it's one's attitude toward difference. *Xenogenesis* makes sex with humans a way of expressing the desire for the same; it makes sleeping with aliens an expression of the desire for difference.

At the same time, however, it has a hard time keeping these desires apart. For if the resisters' desire to "stay human" expresses their fear of difference, it obviously also expresses their desire for difference (difference, that is, from the aliens). Insofar as identity and difference are complementary rather than oppositional terms, the human desire to stay human is simultaneously (and without contradiction) the desire to stay the same and the desire to be different. And the commitment to difference embodied in the commitment to miscegenation produces the same effect from the opposite direction. In a thoroughly miscegenated world, the traits of particular races or species would, of course, disappear – everybody would be the same. Insofar, in other words, as miscegenation is an expression of the appreciation of difference, it is also a technology for the elimination of difference. (This is the point of my earlier equation of miscegenation with assimilation.)

The discourse of hybridity is thus a form of rather than an alternative to the discourse of identity, and the politics of difference are a form of rather than an alternative to the politics of "identity and substantive unity."<sup>19</sup> What I described earlier as a consensus about the value of difference should instead be described as a consensus about the value of the opposition between difference and sameness, the other and the self. It doesn't matter whether what's valorized is the other or the same; what matters is only that, whatever's valorized, it's valorized **as** the other or the same. And if, as I have suggested, the encounter with the alien provides an exemplary opportunity for the emergence of these terms – for the complete saturation of the field of conflict by self and other, by sameness and difference – the completeness of that saturation is made even more visible in the work of those writers

---

18 Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York, 1991), 226.

19 In this connection, it's probably worth pointing out that the recent interest in cosmopolitanism as (alongside hybridity) a kind of corrective to what are understood as the excesses of identitarianism is just another way saving the primacy of the subject position. Universalism makes the subject irrelevant; cosmopolitanism just makes her more widely travelled.

whose generic commitments make it impossible to produce the other as alien but whose commitments to identity remain in no way compromised.

It's because the only choice is between the different and the same that the desire for "something different" (as opposed, say, to something better) can count as the utopian point of Martian colonization in Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy: "not to make another Earth" and therefore "to think harder than ever before about what it means to be Martian."<sup>20</sup> But where Butler imagines the new and strange as the alien, there are no aliens in Robinson. Hence the desire for difference cannot take the form of a commitment to miscegenation, and hence, if the theorization of conflict cannot rely on Cold War style political disagreement (since the Mars trilogy, like *Xenogenesis*, takes place after that war's end), it cannot rely either on the competition between species through which Butler imagines Huntington's clash of civilizations. The problem for the Mars trilogy, then, is to imagine the distinctiveness – which is to say, the difference from Earth – of a Mars inhabited entirely by people who are not distinctive, who are (except for being taller and thinner) in no way different from the people of earth. If in Butler, the alien is the site of bio/cultural difference, the absence of the alien in Robinson requires a difference that will rely as little on bodies and cultures as it does on beliefs.

This requirement is met by an appeal to what might be called geological/geographical difference. The fundamental conflict in the Mars trilogy is between the Reds, who want to keep Mars as it is, to observe what they call its "rock ethic" and the Greens, who want to "terraform" Mars, to make it habitable for humans.<sup>21</sup> But, inasmuch as this conflict threatens to deteriorate into a genuinely ideological dispute – a difference over what to do with Mars rather than a difference between Martians and Terrans, a disagreement between people rather than a difference between peoples – it must itself be transformed.

One way that Robinson imagines this transformation is by aligning the different positions on the future of Mars with different corporations. This appeal to corporate difference is widespread in posthistoricist writing. Sometimes, it takes the form of analogizing corporations to countries (an analogy that has been severely criticized by Paul Krugman); sometimes, it takes the form of replacing countries by corporations.<sup>22</sup> Both

---

20 Kim Stanley Robinson, *Blue Mars* (New York, 1996), 23, 3. *Blue Mars* is the third volume in the trilogy; it's preceded by *Red Mars* and *Green Mars*. The Mars trilogy as a whole is, among other things, a tribute to the success of post-colonial studies and, more generally, to the replacement of oppositions like true/false, just/unjust with self/other and same/different. The idea, of course, is that peoples' beliefs about what is just are really just expressions of their identity; the problem with the idea is that it confuses the conditions under which people come to believe something with their reasons for believing it.

21 Kim Stanley Robinson, *Green Mars* (New York, 1994), 145.

22 It's striking that the characters of the Mars trilogy understand themselves as inhabiting "the postcapitalist era" (77) and that the Mars trilogy attempts to imagine postcapitalism at the moment when Earth is beginning to understand itself as post-socialist. In fact, however, Robinson's postcapitalism looks a lot like postsocialism – everything is corporations, everything its private property, it's just that the corporations are "employee-owned." At the same time, however, there is something weirdly post-capitalist about the corporate world imagined in posthistorical science fiction – it seems also to be post-economic; it's impossible ever to tell in these novels how the corporations make their money or even what they produce. So instead of, as in a certain genre of economic writing, nation-states being imagined as corporations, in posthistoricist science fiction, corporations are imagined as nation-states. Krugman criticizes the analogy between the corporation and the state on the grounds that the state has no product to sell; posthistoricist science fiction replaces the state with the corporation by imagining the corporation as if it were a state, by depriving it too of any commodity to sell. And even when this effort to imagine corporations as if they were states is compromised – by the appearance of some product – the product turns out to be something

forms, however, make possible the rewriting of political difference as economic competition, and hence the transformation of social visions into corporate interests. Corporations, in other words, are more like bodies and cultures than like ideologies; their competition involves only the question of who is stronger or more successful, not the question of who is right. But for this very reason, it is hard to make the question of whether Mars should be left unexploited a matter of corporate competition – it's not in anyone's interest to leave the "rock" as it is, unless you imagine that the rock itself has an interest, that the "rock ethic" is the ethic of the rock.

You could, in other words, replace Oankali bodies with Martian rocks, and thus conceive Mars's rebellion against Earth as an expression of Martian nationalism, as the "revolution" of Martian "natives" who understand themselves to be attacking "colonialism." Of course, this project is complicated by the fact, noted above, that there aren't exactly any Martian natives; the colonization of Mars (unlike the colonization of the Americas, or of Australia or of Africa) really is the colonization of an empty space – those who call themselves natives are just the sons and daughters of the colonists. So to characterize the struggle of the Martians as anti-colonial is in effect to imagine a colonialism whose only victims are the colonists. It's like telling the story of the American Revolution and making sure once again that the Indians get left out, or rather (in classic American fashion), redescribing the colonists **as** the Indians, turning the children of Terrans into "the indigenous people of Mars."<sup>23</sup>

On Earth, however, as we have already seen in Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, "indigenous" is a racialized term. 1992, the year in which the Mars trilogy was begun, was also the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas, and at least one response to that anniversary, the response of indigenous peoples themselves, was to insist on indigenosity as an inherited rather than an acquired characteristic. Thus the "'celebration'" of Columbus's voyage and its "effect on native peoples" would be countered by the declaration of 1993 as the International Year of the World's Indigenous People, "those of us who have lived on the lands of our ancestors since the beginning of history."<sup>24</sup> It's only because they are descended from people who lived on Manhattan at "the beginning of history" that the Native American Council of New York City can distinguish between themselves and other New Yorkers at the end of history. But Martians at the end of history must be able to identify themselves as Martians without the genealogical appeal. They must, in other words, be able to produce an account of "what it means to be Martian" but they must do it not only without any distinctive culture but without any help from their ancestors. Hence in the *Mars* trilogy, the category of the indigenous people of Mars is articulated entirely in geographical, virtually geological terms. Which is to say, in the absence of any political difference from Earth and despite the absence of any biological difference between Martians and Terrans, the indigenous peoples of Mars assert an entirely geographical/geological identity: "Our bodies are made of atoms that until recently were part of the regolith," a Martian leader announces, "We are Martian through and through.

---

that the state rather than any corporation would be committed – the anti-racist black skin-dye marketed by the good corporation in *Islands in the Net* is more like an anti-discrimination law or affirmative action program than it is like the pins and yarn of *Capital*.

23 Robinson, *Blue Mars*, 360.

24 Native American Council of New York City, *Voice of Indigenous Peoples* (Santa Fe, 1994), 21, 19.

We are living pieces of Mars." <sup>25</sup> Not only do you not need different ideologies, you don't need different races or species, you don't need different cultures – all you need is different places.

This identification of the person with the place both literalizes and perfects the commitment to identity by reducing it to – what it always was – the commitment to the subject position. It doesn't matter, in other words, whether you think of difference as physical, cultural or regional, whether you think of it as the difference between nations or the difference between corporations. In the effort to rescue difference from disagreement (which is to say, in the effort to rescue difference from the universalism implied by the mere possibility of disagreement), even the difference between someone who is here (Mars) and someone who is there (Earth) can do the trick. Someone who is here sees things one way; someone who is there sees things another way. For posthistoricist identitarianism, this difference – between here and there, between Mars and Earth – does all the work that the anti-essentialist (so-called) difference between cultures does or that the essentialist (so-called) difference between bodies does.

Huntington thinks that in "ideological conflicts," the "key question" is "Which side are you on?" In such conflicts, the question of which side you're on is a question about what you believe, a question that cannot be answered by a statement about your identity. In the new world, where civilizations not ideologies clash, the question is not which side you're on but "What are you?" The difference between these two questions, Huntington thinks, is a difference between things that can and cannot "be changed." You can change your beliefs; you can't change what you are. But if, as I began to suggest above, the science fiction reduction of what you are to where you are undoes this opposition, it does so only to the extent that the opposition really is founded on the question of what can and can't be changed. The function of the opposition, in other words, is to assert that what matters is the question of whether your position can be changed. And this is just as true for all those on the cultural left – insisting on mobility and the performative – as it is for those, like Huntington, on the cultural right. Indeed, one way of describing the difference between the cultural left and the cultural right is precisely in terms of this difference over the nature of subject positions, over whether they are fixed and stable or mobile and unstable. But, as Butler's imagination of the alien and Robinson's imagination of the native enable us to see, it doesn't matter whether your subject position is fixed or mobile – what matters is just that it **is** a subject position, an identity rather than an ideology. The emergence of the debate over whether identities are mobile or fixed is, in other words, really the emergence of a consensus about the primacy of identity.

That's why even those – like Schlesinger and Lind – who understand themselves to oppose the appeal to identity nonetheless find themselves required to make it. Because the the difference between one cultural nation and another, between "our own culture" and "other cultures," cannot be understood on the model of the difference between ideologies, their defence of American culture cannot hinge on its superiority (in the way that, for instance, capitalism might have been thought superior to communism) but must insist instead on its suitability for those whose culture it is. "We don't have to believe that our values are absolutely better than the next fellow's or the next country's," Schlesinger says, "but we have no doubt that they are better **for us** ..." (137). Or, as Lind puts it, "One should

---

25 Robinson, *Blue Mars*, 590.

cherish one's nation, as one should cherish one's family, not because it is the best in the world, but because, with all its flaws, it is one's own" (10). Rather than America being valued as a place where certain beliefs are held, the beliefs Americans hold will be valued because they are American. Indeed, not only do we not have to believe that American values are really better than the next country's, we are required to believe that they are **not** better. For if we believe that they're better, then, as we have already begun to see, their function as a mark of our distinctiveness is jeopardized; other peoples, recognizing the superiority of our beliefs, might be convinced by them and come to share them. The idea that some values are better than others is, in other words, intrinsically universalist; the idea that those values which seem to us good are only good "**for us**" is intrinsically identitarian. The whole point, then, of the transformation of creed into culture is to enable us to secure our identity by giving up our superiority.

Lind's invocation of the family as a model for the "cultural nation," which is to say, for the nation as an object of affection rather than admiration, is a familiar one. The nation as family has been a recurring motif in American nativism at least since Charles W. Gould's *America, A Family Matter* (1922). But where in the 20s, the invocation of the family was explicitly racist, in Lind, the family is not meant to have anything to do with "blood." It is intended only as an example of what it means to prefer some things to others without thinking that the things one prefers are in fact preferable – you don't have to think that your sister is, by some universal standard, lovable, in order to love her, you only have to think that, with all her "flaws," she's yours. But to put the point this way is, of course, immediately to recognize the uselessness of the family as a model of a truly cultural – i.e. non-racial – nationalism. For the only thing that makes your sister your sister is the fact that she's related to you – it's the blood that makes the family a family and that exempts our preference for it from the need of further justification. The only nation the family can plausibly model is the ethnonation, which is the nation that "liberal nationalists" like Lind and Schlesinger seek to oppose.

"Liberal nationalists," then, cannot rely on the family as the exemplary national institution, instead, they "believe that language and culture – not biology – define nationality" (261). The point here is not just that language (rather than family) is connected to culture, but that language can be called upon to do for culture what the family failed to do – it is linguistic diversity that will provide the exemplary insistence of the non-biological and non-ideological pluralism that liberal nationalism requires. Because the particular language we speak is not determined biologically – people of different races can speak the same language – linguistic diversity can be deployed against racial diversity. But because, at the same time, there's no reason to think that any one language is superior to any other – there's no reason, that is, for all people to aspire to any one language – linguistic diversity can be deployed also against ideological unanimity. If culture is like language, both the multiculturalists (who are ethnonationalists) and the democratic universalists (who aren't any kind of nationalists) are wrong – the American people are one people, not many, and they really are a people, not just the advance guard of democratic universalism.

Liberal nationalists, then, have a culture in the same way that they have a language; they believe what they believe and they do what they do for the same reason that they speak the language they speak – because it's theirs. So just as we do not think that English is true

and French false, we must not think that what Americans believe is true and what Americans do is right while what the French believe is false and what they do is wrong – not because this would be ethnocentric but, just the opposite, because it would make the ethnos irrelevant, it would be universalist. Which is why liberal nationalists must be committed to the view that the differences between, say, what Richard Rorty calls the "moral vocabulary" of St. Paul and the "moral vocabulary"<sup>26</sup> of Freud, should be understood precisely as differences in vocabulary. We shouldn't – indeed, according to the principles of liberal nationalism, we cannot – think of St. Paul and Freud as holding competing "descriptions of the world" for then we should be moved to think of one of them as right and the other wrong. Instead we must think of them as playing what (following Wittgenstein) Rorty calls "alternative language games," in which case saying that Freud's beliefs are more true than St. Paul's makes as little sense as saying that German is more true than Hebrew.

Rorty's antifoundationalism thus provides the philosophical basis for Schlesinger's and Lind's cultural nationalism. Rorty wishes to replace the search for beliefs that, if they are true, are true for everyone (what he calls the commitment to "universal validity") with the willingness to acknowledge that Freud's beliefs are true for Freud and St. Paul's are true for St. Paul (what he calls the "willingness to live with plurality"). And this purely epistemological critique of the universality of truth finds its necessary social expression in a commitment to the primacy of those groups whose particularity makes the critique of universality possible. If some things are true for the Hebrews and some things are true for the Austrians, then the only way to know what is true for you is to know whether you are a Hebrew or a Austrian. On the one hand, cultural nationalism is impossible without antifoundationalism; on the other hand, antifoundationalism is impossible without identitarianism (whether or not Rorty means to commit himself to the primacy of identity).

Thus, although Rorty is less interested than Schlesinger or Silko in what he apparently understands as the merely sociological question of who we today in the U.S. actually are, the requirement that we be somebody and that we be able to say who we are is as crucial to *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989) as it is to *The Disuniting of America* or *Almanac of the Dead*. It's Rorty's "irony" (we know that our beliefs, no matter how strongly we hold them, are not "universally valid") that produces his commitment to "solidarity" (the fact that our beliefs are not "universally valid" doesn't mean they aren't valid for us). And, when it comes to acting on our beliefs, solidarity trumps irony. "We don't have to believe that our values are absolutely better than the next fellow's or the next country's, but we have no doubt that they are better **for us**," we have already heard Schlesinger say, and he goes on to add, "and are worth living by and dying for." What Rorty calls the "fundamental premise" of his philosophy is another version of Schlesinger's call to arms: "a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance" (189). So if we cannot justify our "moral vocabulary" any more than we can justify speaking Hebrew or being Austrian, we don't need to worry because, of course, the fact that we speak Hebrew or are Austrian doesn't need justification. Which is to say that, on Rorty's account, it cannot make sense to die for a belief because you think it's true, it can only make sense to die for a belief because it's yours. Indeed, the antifaunda-

---

26 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge, 1989), 5.

tionalist hero who is prepared first to "face up" to the contingency of his beliefs and then die for them is facing up to nothing other than the primacy of his own identity. It is insofar as he has come to believe what he believes in the same way that he has come to speak the language he speaks (through "contingent historical circumstance") and insofar as he can justify what he believes only by saying who he is (another "contingent historical circumstance"), that he is heroic. Contingency is identity; antifoundationalism is identitarianism.

The fact that Rorty and Schlesinger are more willing to give their lives for their beliefs than they are to maintain their truth may seem odd but it is actually an essential characteristic of nationalist logic. Quoting a Ukrainian writer who insists that "A nation can exist only where there are people who are prepared to die for it," Walker Connor, the distinguished scholar of ethnonationalism, remarks that the "dichotomy between the realm of national identity and that of reason has proven vexing to students of nationalism."<sup>27</sup> But the Ukrainian's sense that the Ukraine needs dead bodies more than it does good reasons is a consequence rather than a violation of rationality. It is only because a belief that is held in the same way that a language is spoken cannot be the sort of thing you argue for that it must be the sort of thing you die for. The virtue of the linguistic analogy is that if, on the one hand, you cannot give good reasons for speaking the language you speak, on the other hand, you don't need to. So your inability to justify your insistence on speaking German instead of Hebrew is inevitably matched by your interlocutor's inability to justify his insistence that you speak Hebrew instead of German. The only justifiable attitude toward different vocabularies is, as Rorty suggests, tolerance. And the only acceptable response to intolerance is, as he also suggests, force.

What justifies both the tolerance and the violent response to intolerance is the absence of any conflict between vocabularies; Hebrew and German do not contradict each other, and insofar as St. Paul's and Freud's moral vocabularies are like Hebrew and German, they don't contradict each other either. But if, then, the great advantage of the linguistic model of culture is that it provides difference without contradiction (as long as we don't see any conflict between our beliefs and "the other fellow's" we don't need to think of ours as being better or worse than his), its great disadvantage, is that it makes contradiction inconceivable (if Paul says that Jesus is God and Freud says he isn't, they aren't disagreeing, they're just speaking different languages). Fukuyama imagines a world where, with the triumph of liberalism, no one any longer disagrees; Rorty, turning an event into an epistemology, imagines a world where not only have people stopped disagreeing, it has become in principle impossible to disagree. The advantage is that once different ideas are turned into different languages, it makes no sense – and, indeed, it seems wrong – for anyone to want to get rid of them. The disadvantage is that once different ideas are turned into different languages it makes no sense for anyone to want to protect them either. If "we're concerned with identity," as Charles Taylor has put it in his well-known (if guarded) defense of multiculturalism, "then what is more legitimate than one's aspiration that it never be lost?"<sup>28</sup> But the real question should be, if we're concerned with identity, how can we possibly care whether it gets lost?

To see the problem here, we have only to ask ourselves what we wish to protect when we wish to protect what another defender of multiculturalism, Will Kymlicka, calls our

---

27 Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism* (Princeton, 1994), 203.

28 Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, 1992), 40.

culture's "distinct existence and identity."<sup>29</sup> One answer – perhaps the most obvious answer – is that we wish to protect our beliefs and practices. But as Kymlicka and others have pointed out, this answer as such won't work; what we seek to protect is more precisely our identity and our identity cannot be conceived simply or primarily in terms of "shared values." For if we think of cultures as shared values, then we cannot commit ourselves simply to respecting other cultures for the obvious reason that cultures which are different from ours will have values that are different from ours, which is to say, values that we may find repugnant and wrong. We don't think, to take a relatively uncontroversial example, that by describing people who believe in apartheid as people who participate in a culture of apartheid, we have earned their beliefs a right to recognition and survival. Multiculturalists are not, in other words, committed to the idea that systems of belief which seem to them deeply wrong and even repugnant can be made defensible simply by redescribing them as cultures. Multiculturalists do not and need not think that calling the commitment to white supremacy a culture earns that commitment the respect that multiculturalists do think cultures require.

But if it is not some set of values that must be respected when cultures are respected, what is it? We know that the concept of culture has been closely – and problematically – linked to the descent-based concepts of race and ethnicity, but even if we ignore the problems – even if we accept the primacy of descent – we have no way of connecting difference in descent with anything we might call cultural difference. No one, for instance, thinks that the language people speak is genetically determined. Indeed, it's precisely because we do **not** believe that the language we speak is determined by our genetic make-up that we may become so determined to defend it when we attempt to protect our culture. If, to take an example crucial to both Taylor and Kymlicka, the Quebecois somehow **did** believe that their children were genetically encoded to speak French, they would not worry about the proliferation of English in Quebec – they would not worry, that is, that their children might grow up speaking English. But because, of course, they know perfectly well that their children are not genetically so encoded, they do worry about what language their children will speak, and the survival of French in Quebec has become a central feature of Canadian multiculturalism.

So multiculturalism doesn't commit us to defending differences in values (we don't think it's important to nurture values we find repugnant) and it also doesn't commit us to protecting racial or ethnic difference, if only because the differences we do want to protect – like linguistic differences – cannot be derived from race or ethnicity. Of course, we might still want to protect racial or ethnic difference but this would be a very different sort of undertaking, one that would replace laws like those prohibiting the public use of English with laws prohibiting intermarriage between people of French Canadian and Anglo-Canadian descent. Which is only to say that if we cannot understand the cultures multiculturalism wishes to protect as sets of beliefs, we cannot understand them as gene pools either. And which is why, as I noted above, linguistic (rather than ideological or physiological) difference plays such a central role in the multiculturalist conception of culture. For if it is true that the language we speak is not a function of our genetic make-up, it is equally true that it is not a social value or belief in the way, say, that a commitment to or against apartheid is.

---

29 Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford, 1995), 36.

To say that the language we speak is not something we believe is just to say, as we have already seen Rorty say, that we don't think of our language – or of any language – as being true or false. And to say that our language is not a value we hold is just to say that we don't think of any language as being better or worse than any other language: "no language," John Edwards has written, "can be described as better or worse than another on purely linguistic grounds," by which he means that all "languages are always sufficient for the needs of their speakers."<sup>30</sup> This is why it makes sense to respect linguistic difference. Because my language cannot be truer or better than yours, it cannot be right for me to compel you to speak my language rather than yours, and, absent some clear evidence of convenience, it cannot even make sense for me to exhort you (much less compel you) to speak my language instead of yours. For what reasons, except reasons of convenience, could I possibly give you? To recognize that our language – or, more generally, our culture – is not a set of beliefs or values is, as we have already seen, to rule out the possibility of there being any good arguments for or against linguistic or cultural practice – all we need to say in justification of our language is that it is our language.

But, just as the fact that our language isn't a set of beliefs makes sense of our desire to fight (rather than argue) for it, the fact that it isn't a value makes nonsense of our desire to preserve it, of what Taylor calls our "aspiration that it never be lost." It is, in other words, just because we do not need to justify our culture that we cannot wish for it to survive. For why should anyone care if a culture survives? Insofar as a culture might be understood to consist in a set of beliefs or values, of course, it is easy to see why one might care. The commitment, say, to liberal democracy is incoherent except as a commitment to the idea that liberal democracy is a superior form of government, and what it means to think that it's superior is to think that it's superior for everyone everywhere, hence not only for people elsewhere but for people later. But, as we have seen, the whole point of the idea of culture – the reason why our language emerges as the exemplary practice of our culture – is that, if we are multiculturalists, we cannot think of our culture as a set of beliefs or values. We do not think of our culture as an ideology, superior to the ideology of others; if we did, then it would make no sense for us to think that cultures other than our own should survive. Which is just to say that we do not want beliefs that seem to us mistaken and unjust to survive.

But if our culture does not ultimately consist in a set of values, why should we want even our own to survive? Why should we care if the language we speak will continue to be spoken? Because we do not think of our language as a value (we don't think of it as better or worse than other people's languages), we do feel it would be unjust for others to penalize us for speaking our language, or for us to penalize others for speaking their language. Does it then make sense for us to want our language to survive? If we are required to live in a world in which we will not be able to speak our language, we will be the victims of an injustice; who will be the victims of injustice in a world where our language does not survive, which is to say, in a world where no one speaks our language?

The answer is obvious: no one. If we speak French, it makes sense for us to wish to live in a society where French is spoken but it cannot make sense for us to wish that French continue to be spoken – it cannot make sense for us to care one way or the other about what language will come to be spoken. If our children – exposed to TV and to books, magazines and newspapers in English – become bilingual in French and English, and their children

---

30 John Edwards, *Multilingualism* (London, 1995), 90, 92.

barely speak French, and their children don't speak French at all, no one has been the victim of any injustice (or even inconvenience). Everyone is always speaking his or her language; it's just that the language our grandchildren speak is different from the language we speak. The only victim is the language itself – but how can a language be a victim? And if cultural extinction is a truly victimless crime, how can it be a crime at all?

So whether or not the "aspiration" that "identity" "never be lost" is, as Taylor says, "legitimate," it's hard to see why it's an aspiration that anyone should actually have. It's hard, in other words, to see how it can make sense for anyone to want an identity to survive. It may well make sense for us to want practices that we think of as good to survive, but the point for multiculturalists is not that we should seek to perpetuate those practices we approve of but rather that we should seek to perpetuate those practices we understand to constitute our identity. This is what distinguishes the commitment to diversity as such (i.e. to multiculturalism) from an instrumentalist tolerance (on the model, say, of the marketplace of ideas). The idea of tolerating and even encouraging lots of different practices on the model of the marketplace of ideas involves the sense that promoting such diversity will help us find the best practices. But since the practices to which multiculturalism is committed are the practices which constitute an identity, their value is intrinsic, which is to say that we are not interested in creating a world in which the best of them survive – as multiculturalists, we are committed to all of them surviving. But as long as we are concerned with practices that do not seem to us better or worse – as long, in other words, as we are concerned with practices which seem to us valuable only insofar as they constitute an identity – why should we care if any of them survive? Our great-grandchildren will all speak **some** language – why should we care which one it is? Multiculturalism makes sense as long as the practices it asks us to value are those practices which seem to us neither better nor worse, neither true nor false – as long as they involve or constitute an identity. It seems right, in other words, that people who speak French should not be forced to speak English. But, precisely because those practices seem to us neither better nor worse, it makes no sense for us to care about whether they survive. Because I care that people who speak French should be able to speak French, I can't possibly care if anyone actually does speak French.

### *The Shape of the Signifier*

Nevertheless, in posthistoricism, the question of what language is being spoken characteristically trumps the question of what is being said and questions about what something is will characteristically be understood as questions about what it calls itself. On Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars, "The question is, what is Mars's own name for itself?"<sup>31</sup> The question gets asked in the second volume of his Mars Trilogy, *Green Mars*; the context in which it's asked is what Robinson calls an "areophany," a ritual in which the first colonists on Mars recite the names for Mars in as many languages as they can: English, Arabic, Japanese, etc. The answer to the question, Robinson tells us about two hundred pages later, is "Ka." But this is an answer that in an important sense only deepens the question. "Ka" is

---

31 Kim Stanley Robinson, *Green Mars* (New York, 1994), 54.

"a sound that a whole lot of Earth names for Mars" have in them, Robinson says.<sup>32</sup> But it's hard to see why the fact that the Arabs call Mars Qahira and the Japanese call it Kasei should mean that Ka is "Mars's own name for itself." Ka is also what Robinson describes as the "little red people on Mars" call it. But the little red people in Robinson don't actually exist; they are presented as a kind of myth invented by humans. Indeed, one of the ways in which Robinson's Mars Trilogy (and much recent Mars fiction, like Ben Bova's *Mars* and Greg Bear's *Moving Mars*) differs from some other recent ambitious works of science fiction (say, Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* series or Orson Scott Card's *Ender Quartet*) is in its apparent indifference to the question of the alien. Robinson's Mars is a lifeless planet before colonization. So if the question about Mars's own name for itself cannot be a question about what humans call it, it can't exactly be a question about what Martians call it either. In the Mars Trilogy, there are no Martians.

And yet it's a little misleading to say that in the Mars Trilogy there are no Martians, for although everybody in the Trilogy is human, there are people by the Trilogy's end who not only call themselves Martians but describe themselves as "the indigenous people of Mars."<sup>33</sup> And this concern with Mars's indigenous population appears also in Ben Bova's recent Mars book which, like the Mars Trilogy, contains no Martians but which, also like the Mars Trilogy, is interested in the question of what it would mean for there to be – or, in Bova's *Mars* – for there to have been Martians. Bova's *Mars* begins with its hero wondering, as he and his companions first set foot on the Martian surface, if there are "Martians hidden among the rocks ... watching them the way red men had watched the first whites step ashore ... centuries ago."<sup>34</sup> Of course, there aren't, but Bova's *Mars* was published in 1992, and, transforming Robinson's mythical red people into the (equally, but differently, mythical) red men of the New World, Bova not only insists on the parallel between the two landings but enforces the parallel between the two peoples: what Bova's hero, Jamie Waterman, will discover is that there once were red men on Mars. And although Bova is less explicitly interested than Robinson in what they might have called Mars or themselves, he does provide some information about what their language might have been.

For Jamie himself is what Bova calls a "red man," the son of a white woman and of a Navajo who "has turned himself into an Anglo," and he, like his putative Martian predecessors, has been in danger of vanishing, if only through assimilation into the white world. It's not until his Navajo grandfather takes him to the Anasazi ruins at Mesa Verde (where the Cliff Palace, made of "reddish brown sandstone", is said to be "almost the same color as Mars") and reminds him of who he is that he feels the full force of his Indian identity. "Your ancestors built that village five hundred years before Columbus was born," the grandfather says. So later, when Jamie discovers "a rock formation" on Mars – in a cleft "like the cleft at Mesa Verde" – he realizes that he's looking at "buildings," constructed, he imagines, by "the ancestors of his ancestors." And so the red people of Mars really are like the red men of New Mexico, and the fact that Jamie's first words on Mars – "Ya'aa'tey" – are spoken in "the language of [his] ancestors" means he is speaking a tongue that

---

32 Ibid., 274.

33 Kim Stanley Robinson, *Blue Mars* (New York, 1996), 360.

34 Ben Bova, *Mars* (New York, 1992), 11.

indigenous Martians could have understood: if Mars's own name for itself is the name Martians call it, Ben Bova imagines that name will be a Navajo one.<sup>35</sup>

Bova's *Mars* is thus not only a narrative of New World exploration, it's also a kind of *Roots* for Martians. Which, of course, somewhat complicates the parallel to Columbus's arrival in the Americas, since for Columbus to be like Jamie the Indians he discovered would have to turn out to be his long-lost cousins, and it's hard to see how redescribing the European conquest of the Americas as a family reunion can count as a protest against the European exploitation of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. But then it's even harder to see how Navajo Jamie can count as a Martian Anasazi. For even if the Martians were the ancestors of the Anasazi, the Anasazi weren't the ancestors of the Navajo – the Navajo arrived in New Mexico after the Anasazi had already disappeared. And if the Navajo are not exactly native to New Mexico, the Anasazi weren't either: the Paleo-Indians from whom they descended "were not indigenous to North America;"<sup>36</sup> which is just to say that basically all the peoples of the southwest seem to have arrived there from somewhere else – their indigeness is more acquired than inherited. And while this process is obscured by Bova's appeal to the red man – it seems that he wants to protect the indigenous people against their invaders by making everyone, **including** the invader, indigenous – it is rendered rather dramatically visible on Robinson's Mars, where those who call themselves native Martians are just the children and grandchildren of the first colonists from Earth. We are "becoming indigenous to the land," says one of Robinson's Martians.<sup>37</sup> It's as if the descendants of the European conquerors (of Cortez and Columbus and William Bradford and John Smith) had declared themselves Native Americans – which, of course, in the various nativist narrativists that made places like Mesa Verde symbols of American identity – they did.

But the prestige of the indigenous for Robinson is linked to something more than the claims of prior habitation, and to something more, even, than the claims to cultural identity that, in the classic American literature of the 20s, so frequently accompanied the appeal to the American Indian and even to Mesa Verde.<sup>38</sup> For in Robinson, as in a wide range of more recent texts, indigenous cultures are valued not (or not only) for the fact that they resist assimilation to other cultures – it's the resistance to Americanization that Mesa Verde in New Mexico makes possible for Jamie and that Mesa Verde on Mars confirms – but also for the fact that their refusal to be absorbed by other cultures is understood not simply as an affirmation of their own culture but as a suspicion of culture as such. Or perhaps, more precisely, as a suspicion of the idea that it is only humans or persons who have cultures. Hence, in Robinson's Mars, it is not exactly "Martian culture" that must be preserved; it is Mars itself, Martian rock, which is to say, Martian nature.<sup>39</sup>

We have already noted that Bova's *Mars* was published in 1992, the year of the Columbus quinquacentennial; Robinson's *Red Mars* was published in 1993, proclaimed by

35 Ibid., 107, 247, 12.

36 William M. Ferguson and Arthur H. Rohn, *Anasazi Ruins of the Southwest* (Albuquerque, 1987), 1.

37 Robinson, *Blue Mars*, 369.

38 The locus classicus would be Willa Cather's extraordinary *The Professor's House*. For an account of this and related texts, see Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America* (Durham, 1995).

39 The point here is not to identify indigenous peoples with nature as opposed to culture but to imagine instead that nature has a culture and, identifying the cultures of indigenous peoples with nature's culture, to make the commitment to the cultural rights of indigenous people identical to the commitment to preserving nature.

the United Nations, "The International Year of the World's Indigenous People." The timing of the U.N. proclamation was, of course, as the then Secretary General of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, put it, "no coincidence;" it was on Human Rights Day in 1992 that he issued his proclamation, making clear its status as a response to the violations of human rights set in motion by Columbus.<sup>40</sup> But the indigenous people who listened to the Secretary General and who participated in the conference that he convened made it clear in response that they themselves understood the defense of their specifically human rights as only part of a larger project, a "struggle," as the Native American Council of New York City put it, for the "survival" of "the planet itself." Most human beings have "separated themselves from the land and nature" but "Indigenous people are one with the land," said William Means (the President of the International Indian Treaty Council) and "it is through their voice that nature can speak to us."<sup>41</sup> So the answer to the question posed by Hopi elder Thomas Banyacya – "Who in this world can speak for nature?" – was the "native peoples of the world." And, in Robinson, the answer to the question of who on Mars can speak for nature is the native peoples of that world: Mars is "part of our bodies," say the Martian natives, "Our bodies are made of atoms that until recently were part of the Martian regolith"<sup>42</sup> so "we can speak for the land ..."<sup>43</sup>

If, then, we return to the question we began with – What is Mars's name for itself? – it looks after all like, whatever that name is, it must be the name used by the people who, because they have become indigenous to Mars, can "speak for" it. At the same time, however, we must recognize that Robinson himself, as committed as he is to imagining a people who are literally indigenous – whose bodies, insofar as they consist of Martian water and Martian regolith, are literally a part of the land – cannot quite accept the idea that such people could meet the demand for the land's name for itself. For the Martian natives are not Martian rocks but are only, as it were, part rock, which is to say that insofar as they are human and the land they speak for is not, their claim to speak for it testifies to what Robinson and a number of other writers associated with the deep ecology movement understand as a certain anthropocentric presumption. Our responsibility, according to eco-theorists like David Abram, "is to renounce the claim that 'language' is an exclusively human property" and to begin to listen to what "a world that **speaks**" has to say.<sup>44</sup> If, then, the science fiction concern for what languages are spoken on Mars articulates a commitment to respecting the rights of other peoples (and we will return to the question of why the question of their rights will be so deeply connected to the question of their language), it articulates also a commitment to respecting the rights of others who are not people.<sup>45</sup> "One had to let things speak for themselves," Robinson writes, "This was perhaps

---

40 The Native American Council of New York City, *Voice of Indigenous Peoples*, edited by Alexander Ewen, with a Preface by Rigoberta Menchu and a Foreword by Boutros Boutros-Ghali (Santa Fe, 1994), 9. Many of those involved in the project had wanted 1992 to be the Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples; according to the anonymous authors of the Introduction to *Voice*, "pressure from Spain, Brazil, and the United States, among others" (21), made that impossible.

41 *Ibid.*, 26, 115, 60, 115.

42 Robinson, *Green Mars*, 589.

43 Robinson, *Blue Mars*, 272.

44 David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York, 1996), 80-81.

45 It is, of course, possible to articulate a commitment to rights independent of the question of language and at least one important strain of deep ecology – that represented, for example, by the legal writer Christopher Stone – has been interested in the "legal rights" of what he calls "natural objects" without being interested in their language or, for that matter, even feeling compelled to assert that they spoke a

true of all phenomena. Nothing could be spoken for. One could only walk over the land and let it speak for itself."<sup>46</sup>

But how can the land speak for itself, how can things speak for themselves? If Mars is nothing but rock, what can it mean to think not just that it has a name but that it has a name for itself? The contrast with the rock on Bova's Mars is instructive here. For Bova, for Jamie, the fundamental question about the "rock formation" he discovers is whether it is "natural" ("Just a formation of rocks that look roughly like walls and towers made by intelligent creatures") or "artificial" (which is to say, "buildings," the "forerunners of Mesa Verde").<sup>47</sup> Because Jamie's ambition is to discover life on Mars, his hope is that the rock formation is artificial, which is to say, that the arrangement of the rocks testifies to the presence (if not now, once) of the humans, or at least persons, who did the arranging. But Robinson's Mars is "only rock." And his interest in knowing what it says, what it calls itself, is precisely a function of the fact that it does **not** testify to the presence of any persons. Indeed, it's only when the persons who see the rocks are themselves in some way impaired (both Robinson's central characters develop aphasia) that they begin to understand the rocks. On the one hand, "Things lost their names," which is to say, we can't remember the names we gave them. On the other hand – precisely because we can't remember the names we gave them – we can begin to see their own names: we can "see them and think about them in terms of shapes ..." "They are shapes without the names but the shapes alone [are] like names. Spatializing language."<sup>48</sup>

Bova's Jamie thinks that the "shapes" of his rocks mean that there used to be Indians on Mars; no one on Robinson's Mars thinks that. But the important difference between these texts has nothing to do with the question of whether there ever was intelligent life on Mars, nothing to do with their differing narratives of how the rocks in which they're interested came to have their shapes. It has to do instead with their different accounts of the status of shape as such. The question raised by these two texts, in other words, is the question of the relation between what something is shaped like and what something is. They differ in their answers to that question: on Bova's Mars, the shapes of the rocks are regarded as clues, which is to say, the fact that they look like cliff dwellings is regarded as evidence that they might be cliff dwellings; on Robinson's Mars, the shapes aren't evidence of what the rocks are, rather, it is the shapes of the rocks that make them what they are. This is what it means for Robinson to imagine that there can be language on Mars without there being any persons (Martian, Navajo, whatever) to have spoken that language. And if this claim, put in these terms, seems slightly implausible – how, after all, can there be texts without persons to produce those texts? – it's not very difficult to imagine a way of enhancing its plausibility. Suppose that you're walking through the "stone and sand" of Mars, and you come across some curious squiggles in the sand, or a curious formation of the rock. You step back and you notice that they seem to spell out the following words:

---

language (Stone, *Should Trees Have Standing?* [New York, 1996], 1). Stone's original essay ("Should Trees Have Standing?: Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects") was published in 1972; perhaps, putting the point a little too crudely and anticipating an argument that will need to be made at greater length, one could say that as deep ecology's interest in the natural world has modulated from an interest in respecting the rights of objects to an interest in respecting their differences, it has made the question of language increasingly central.

46 Robinson, *Blue Mars*, 96.

47 Bova, *Mars*, 272, 245, 258, 247.

48 Robinson, *Green Mars*, 406.

A slumber did my spirit seal;  
 I had no human fears.  
 She seemed a thing that could not feel  
 The touch of earthly years.

On Earth, or on Ben Bova's Mars, you might immediately think that someone had been there before you, writing. In the essay, "Against Theory," that Steven Knapp and I wrote in 1982, we suggested that it was only when, seeing these shapes on a beach, you then saw a wave wash up and recede, leaving behind this pattern –

No motion has she now, no force:  
 She neither hears nor sees;  
 Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,  
 With rocks and stones and trees.

– that you realized no person had made these marks. On Robinson's Mars, however, which is "only rock" and where there are no other persons, you know right away that the marks have not been made by anyone and that if what you're looking at is a poem (a poem apparently about Earth), it is the planet itself that has produced it.

The question raised in "Against Theory" was whether these marks **were** a poem or, more generally, whether they were language. If, Knapp and Michaels argued, the marks were signs produced by some agent who meant something by them (in the way, say, that Bova's Jamie thinks of his rocks as artifacts produced by Martian Anasazi), then they were language; if, like Robinson's rocks, they were produced by what "Against Theory" called "natural accident," then they weren't.<sup>49</sup> "Against Theory" argued, in other words, that what these marks meant – indeed, what these marks **were** – was entirely determined by the intention of their author. Those who disagreed with it asserted in various forms the irrelevance of the author's intention but even those, like John Searle, who were most sympathetic to the idea that a text could only mean what its author intended denied that the marks could only be words if they were intended to be. As Searle eventually put it, "In linguistics, philosophy and logic words ... are standardly defined purely formally"; hence, "it is simply not true that in order for a physical token to be a word ... it must have been produced by an intentional human action."<sup>50</sup> The appeal to the "purely formal" here is an appeal to the physical, to the shape of the signifier. Clearly the marks are shaped like language – they look just like English words. But is being shaped like language enough to be language? Is what makes a word a word the fact that it's being used as a word or the fact that it's shaped like a word?

On Robinson's *Mars*, as I've already indicated, the correct answer is shape. But, of course, Robinson doesn't exactly think there are English words on Mars, waiting to be discovered by colonists. Like other deep ecologists, he thinks that nature has a language, but he doesn't think that language is English. When Abram describes the "tribal hunters" who "once read the tracks of deer, moose, and bear printed in the soil of the forest floor"

49 Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, "Against Theory," *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (Summer 1982), 728.

50 John R. Searle, "Literary Theory and Its Discontents." *New Literary History*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Summer 1994), 649-650.

(95), he doesn't think that the moose were leaving messages for the hunters in the hunters' tribal language.<sup>51</sup> Rather the moose left traces of their presence and these traces are indeed entirely physical, formal. Which is just to say that their shape is the only thing about them that matters – the difference between the marks that mean deer and the marks that mean moose has nothing to do with the intentions of the creatures who made the marks. But, of course, most theorists of meaning would not consider these traces to be linguistic. Moose tracks mean moose only in the sense that they count as physical evidence that a moose has been there, and when theorists like Searle claim that the shape makes the word they do not base their claim on the idea that the shape of the word is the shape of (some part of) the creature that made the word – their whole point is that it does not matter which, if any, creature made the word, that no narrative of how the marks were made is relevant to the question of whether the marks constitute a word. They think that the shape of the marks, however they were made, determines whether those marks are words and what words they are. But can this be true?

Suppose, walking along the Martian regolith, the marks you come across look a little like this: "a slumber did my spirit seal." They're in cursive and you can't make out whether the third letter in the last word is an "a" or an "r" or whether the very last bit is the letter "e" or just the end of the "l." Would the answer to the question which letter it is be which letter it resembles most? If you thought the letter had been produced by a person writing in English, shape would clearly not be definitive – it would function, in other words, as a clue rather than a criterion. This is why it can make sense to say of someone that her "a"s look like "r"s or vice versa. For an "a" to look like an "r" and not thereby become an "r," the fact of its shape cannot be decisive. For if shape **were** decisive (and on Mars, shape is decisive), then something that looked like an "r" would necessarily be an "r."<sup>52</sup>

But what are the criteria for looking like an "r"? There aren't any, not because we don't have some idea of what it looks like for something to look like an "r" but because, even if something looks to us like an "a," we don't have any argument against someone who says that the same thing looks to him like an "r." How could we? If to be an "r" involved more than just looking like an "r," we might have arguments against it actually being an "r." But the fact that some shape looks to somebody like an "r" is a fact about that person's experience, and it's hard to see how we could argue that the shape **didn't** really look to him like an "r." And if being an "r" is a matter of looking like an "r," then it is an "r" – at least to him. We may, in other words, disagree with someone about whether an "r" really is an "r," but we don't disagree with him about whether it looks like an "r" to him. Or, to put the point in the opposite direction, we can't really disagree with someone about whether an "r" is an r unless we already think that being an "r" involves something more than looking like an "r";

---

51 Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 95.

52 In response to an earlier version of this argument, Searle suggested that, confronted with such departures from "orthographic norms," one would "appeal to the producer of the sentence to find out what he or she intended" (Ibid., 680). But if the letters have been produced by natural accident, then, of course, there is no possibility of such an appeal, and, more importantly, if the letters are defined as purely formal entities, there can be no point to such an appeal. For to define them purely formally is to define them without reference to any particular account of how they were produced. So if the letters really are purely formal entities, which is to say, if they are whatever letters they are independent of any causal account of their production, what good will it do to appeal to the person who produced them? She can, at best, tell you what letters she was trying to write, not what letters she has actually written.

without the appeal to something beyond shape, the difference between us is just a difference in our experience, not a difference of opinion.

And we may, of course, just as easily encounter this kind of difference – difference without disagreement, which is to say, without there being anything to disagree about – without reference to anyone **else's** experience. Suppose the areological formations we're calling letters are several hundred feet long and dozens of feet wide so when you're walking around the Martian surface they just seem to you like irregular indentations but, seen from a couple of thousand feet above (when you're landing or taking off), they look like a line from a Wordsworth poem. From the ground there are no shapes that look like letters but from the air there are. Are there letters on Mars? It depends on your perspective. But which perspective is the right one? You might be able to answer the question which perspective is the most beautiful or which perspective is the most interesting but you obviously can't answer the question which is right. All you can say is there are areological formations that from one angle (or from a certain distance or at a certain time of day or in certain kinds of light) have the shape of letters and that from another angle don't. The question of whether those formations really are letters regardless of your perspective makes no sense since, as long as the relevant criterion is formal (is shape), the question of whether the formations really are letters is a question that is crucially about your perspective. Hence the commitment to the primacy of the materiality of the signifier – to shape – is also a commitment to the primacy of experience – to the subject position. Because what something looks like must be what it looks like to someone, the appeal to the shape of the signifier is at the same time an appeal to the position and hence, I will argue, to the identity of its interpreter.

From the standpoint of the recent history of literary theory, the simultaneity of these appeals helps explain how the commitment to the materiality of the signifier that was so central to theory in the 70s and early 80s could so easily become (what it, in effect, already was) the commitment to those categories of personhood (race, gender, above all, culture) that were so central to theory in the late 80s and the 90s.<sup>53</sup> Which is just to say that the redescription of difference of opinion (the difference between what you think that letter is and what I think that letter is) as difference in subject position (the difference between you and me) makes the literary critical critique of intentionalism into the posthistoricist valorization of identity. More generally – beyond the question of intention – it is difference itself that emerges as intrinsically valuable. Because there is no contradiction between the fact that from a certain distance, at a certain angle, in a certain light those formations on Mars do have the shapes of letters and the fact that from another distance, at a different angle and in a different light, they don't, there is no necessary or intrinsic conflict between these positions, no question of right or wrong, true or false.

That's why it's the name Mars calls itself – rather than, say, its true name – that matters to Robinson and why the "United Nations Draft Declaration of Indigenous Peoples Rights" – which begins by affirming a general "right of all peoples to be different" (159) – goes on to specify the right of indigenous peoples "to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons."<sup>54</sup> If we value "Mars's own name for itself," it cannot

---

53 For an account of the empiricism of deconstruction's relation to the materiality of the signifier, see Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime* (New York, 1992).

54 *Ibid.*, 159, 165.

be because we think that name is correct; how could a name for something in one language (say, Martian) be more correct than the name for the same thing in another language (say, English)? If we value the Martian name, we must value it because we respect the rights of Martians to use their own language. And, by the same token, if we don't value Mars's name for itself, it cannot be because we think that name is mistaken. Insofar, then, as the exemplary conflicts become conflicts over what names things should be called, conflict itself requires a new explanation. The conviction that others are mistaken must be redescribed as dislike of the fact that they are different and the desire to convince them of the truth must be redescribed as the desire to get them to be the same. And since this desire, even if it is regarded as in some sense inevitable, is nevertheless in principle indefensible (why should our perspective be everyone's? Why should everyone use the names we use? Why should everybody be like us?), the recommended response to difference becomes appreciative – to protect the things that make us who we are, to respect the things that make others who they are. Hence the Draft Declaration's celebration of the "diversity and richness of civilizations and cultures" and hence its distinctive hostility not simply to genocide (of which, after all, no one approves) but to "assimilation" or "cultural genocide." It is the right to cultural difference and to cultural survival that those who wish to call things by their own names assert.

What's crucial here is not only (as we saw in the previous section) that the model of linguistic difference disconnects the commitment to the survival of cultures from the commitment to their value but also that the formalism of the signifier makes every instance of reading and writing into the emergence of linguistic difference and thus transforms people who believe different things into people who speak different languages. In literary theory, this transformation takes place in what Derrida has called the "substitution of mark for sign,"<sup>55</sup> the substitution that I have described as the emergence of the shape of the signifier as constitutive of the identity of the text, and that is foundational not only to deconstruction but to every account of literary texts that imagines they can have more than one meaning or, more particularly, that imagines they can mean something other than what their authors intended. For it is perfectly and, indeed, uncontroversially true that the same marks can have different meanings, and if we think of texts as composed of marks then it must be equally true that the same text can have different meanings – what it means to you may well be different from what it means to me, just as what looks to you like an "r" may well look to me like an "a." For some, of course, the problem with this view is that it seems to make impossible the resolution of our disagreements, but the real problem, if there is one, is that it makes disagreement impossible, not resolution. Hence political theories which take their inspiration from deconstructive theories of language – like Judith Butler's effort in *Excitable Speech* to "outline" a "theory of the performativity of political discourse"<sup>56</sup> – will, like Huntington and Fukuyama, produce differences without differences of opinion, conflicts without disagreements.

---

55 Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.* translated by Samuel Weber (Evanston, 1988), 66. Derrida couples the substitution of the mark for the sign with the "substitution of intentional effect for intention," and although a full discussion of the notion of effect in deconstruction is beyond the scope of this essay, it may be worth noting the appeal to the subject position intrinsic to it: the meaning of a sign will not depend on its readers, the effect of a mark will.

56 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York, 1997), 40.

Butler calls these differences "conflicts of interpretation," and she identifies them as products of what she describes as "a permanent diversity within the semantic field" which, once acknowledged, enables us to recognize that no "utterance" has "the same meaning everywhere" and hence that the context in which meaning is assigned to an utterance "has become a scene of conflict ..."<sup>57</sup> One of the points of *Excitable Speech* is thus to argue against hate speech laws which, by trying to "fix" the meaning of terms like "queer" and "nigger," make both the theoretical mistake of imagining that utterances can have a single meaning and the political mistake of foreclosing the opportunity to "appropriate those terms from the dominant discourse and rework or resignify" them and thus "to rally a political movement" (158). The conflict, then, is a conflict over the meaning of an utterance like "queer." But what exactly is this conflict a conflict about? It clearly isn't a conflict about the interpretation of an utterance; if one person uses the word "queer" as a term of abuse and another person uses it as expression of resistance to that abuse, the two speakers can hardly be said to have conflicting interpretations of an utterance. They don't, in other words, disagree about what they mean; they just mean different things. Perhaps, then, the conflict should be understood not as a conflict over what they mean but as a conflict over what "queer" means. But a conflict over what meaning to assign to "queer" isn't exactly a conflict of interpretation either; we don't think, for example, that speakers of Spanish who assign the meaning "royal" to the marks "real" have a conflict of interpretation with speakers of English who assign the meaning "not imagined" to the same marks. In fact, two speakers who mean different things by the same marks ("queer") are in the same situation as two speakers who mean the same thing by different marks ("Mars," "Ka"); they aren't disagreeing, they're just speaking different languages.

It is Butler's commitment to "resignification," her transformation of conflict over which interpretation of an utterance is correct into conflict over which language to use – a transformation made not only possible but inevitable by the reduction of the sign to the mark, the utterance to its shape – that produces her complete allegiance to the primacy of the subject position. And it is her conviction that this transformation makes possible a "more general theory of the performativity of political discourse" that marks the complete subsumption of her notion of the political by the posthistorical identitarianism of Huntington and Fukuyama.<sup>58</sup> For if, from one standpoint (the standpoint of people whose commitment, say, to equal rights for gay people is not defined by their commitment to changing the meaning of the word "queer"), the "political promise" of Butler's project of "resignification" may look a little inadequate (even if we use "queer" insultingly, the people we call queer may flourish; even if we use it with pride, those of us who so use it may be discriminated against), from the standpoint of posthistoricism, the replacement of conflicting interpretations by competing efforts of resignification is an obvious gain. For – precisely because there can be no right answer about what "queer" (or any other set of marks) really means<sup>59</sup> – any conflict between you and me about what "queer" means is just

---

57 *Ibid.*, 87, 91.

58 *Ibid.*, 40. Actually, this formulation is a little unfair to Fukuyama, since his point, of course, is that the end of contradiction (aka the triumph of liberalism) marks an end to politics. Butler's particular contribution is to turn the end into the beginning.

59 The thing there can be a right answer about is what someone means by it, which is why the argument for intentionalism here is just that it is the only way of accounting for conflicts that really are conflicts of interpretation.

that, a conflict between you and me: I use it to mean one thing, you use it to mean another. And this conflict has nothing to do with ideology; it is nothing but a conflict of subject positions. Insofar, then, as political conflicts can be understood as conflicts between meanings (it is our ability to "contest for meanings" that Donna Haraway claims the insights of postmodern theory will enhance<sup>60</sup>) they must be understood as above all conflicts of identity.

Another way to put this is just to say that because the difference between interpretations is here redescribed as a difference between languages, the effort to convince people of the truth of your interpretation must be redescribed as the effort to make them speak your language. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the effort to convince people of the truth is confused with and thus replaced by the effort to make them speak the same language. Thus Haraway equates the "dream of a common language" with the dream of "a perfectly true language," and, repudiating the commitment to truth, insists on the value of linguistic difference.<sup>61</sup> And thus, even more strikingly, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, lamenting the disappearance of many of the world's languages ("on the eve of the year 2000, the number of languages and dialects spoken throughout the five continents was only half what it had been in 1900"), warns us that "if we are not careful," the world will be "reduced to a single culture, a single language" and, "although we will speak with one voice, we will have nothing to say."<sup>62</sup> The commitment to difference without disagreement appears here in its purest possible form since the only conditions under which it is possible for us to disagree – our speaking the same language – are understood by Haraway and Boutros-Ghali as conditions under which we have nothing to disagree about. Haraway and Boutros-Ghali think, in other words, that to speak the same language is to say the same thing, or, turned around, that to say different things is to speak different languages. So the unhappy future they fear is a world in which we all speak the same language but have nothing to say to each other and the happy ending they hope for is a world in which we all speak different languages and can't understand each other.

For Haraway and Boutros-Ghali, then, as for Butler, there can be no conflicts of interpretation, not because there can be no conflict but because there can be no interpretation. All conflict has been turned into conflict between those who speak one language and those who speak another or between those who wish to eliminate difference and those who wish to preserve it, and the act of interpreting what someone says has been reconfigured either as the act of saying the same thing or as the act of saying something else. It is for this reason – this calling into question the very notion of the interpretation of an utterance – that Derrida, as we noted above, attempts to avoid both the term "utterance" and the concept of interpretation, substituting "the phrase 'functioning of the mark'" for "'understanding' the 'written utterance.'"<sup>63</sup> For if the very idea of understanding involves the idea of a common language, the very idea of an utterance – or, for that matter, of a sign – involves the idea of a single meaning to be understood. The same sign cannot, in other words, have different meanings because for the sign to be the same it must have not only the same signifier but the same signified and if it has the same signified then it doesn't have

---

60 Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York, 1991), 154.

61 *Ibid.*, 173.

62 *Ibid.*, 13, 15.

63 Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, 61.

a different meaning. And, by the same token, what Butler calls an utterance that "does not have the same meaning everywhere" cannot be the same utterance.<sup>64</sup> If different people mean different things when they say "queer," it is not because they have produced the same utterance with a different meaning but because they have produced different utterances. They, have, however, used the same marks. The advantage of mark over utterance and over sign is thus that people can without disagreement give the same mark different meanings.

Hence Derrida, transforming different interpretations of the same text into different uses of the same mark, makes disagreement impossible from the start. And hence deconstruction emerges as a technology of identity, resolving differences of opinion (about what a text means) by turning them into differences of subject position (about what to make a mark mean). Its critique of the subject – its insistence that no one can control the meaning of an utterance – amounts from this perspective to nothing more than the reminder that there are, after all, other subjects. Because "one always risks meaning something other than what one thinks one utters," Butler says, "one cannot know in advance the meaning that the other will assign to one's utterance, what conflict of interpretation may well arise and how best to adjudicate that difference."<sup>65</sup> Insofar as the risk Butler describes is the risk of misinterpretation, then it must be true that everyone always takes it – there can be no way to guarantee that you will be understood, and the only alternative to being understood is being misunderstood. Which is just to say that there often are conflicting beliefs about the meaning of an utterance and, when there are, at least one of them must be mistaken. But the risk that the other will misunderstand your utterance is not the same as the risk that the other will make your utterance mean something different. And the risk that the other will make your utterance mean something different is a risk that no one ever runs. The other can't possibly make your utterance mean something different because when your utterance is made to mean something different it isn't your utterance any more – it just looks and sounds a lot like yours. Which is just to say that the transformation of interpretation into resignification is only made possible by the transformation of the sign into the signifier, the utterance into the mark.

It's only when the sign becomes the signifier that the otherness of the other matters; it's only when the question of what you believe becomes irrelevant that the question of who you are becomes essential. That's how Butler's performative becomes as effective as Huntington's culture in replacing ideology with identity. The deconstructive commitment to the materiality of the signifier is linked in principle to a valorization of the subject position that makes the question of identity (both the reader's and the writer's) primary. And the "force of the performative," precisely because it goes "beyond all question of truth or meaning," will be to replace the understanding appropriate to the sign with the affect appropriate to the mark.

---

64 Ibid., 91.

65 Ibid., 87-88.

## *The End of Theory*

In Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, one way to imagine talking to a woman is by carving "words" "into her with an ice pick."<sup>66</sup> When you tell the girl who works in the video store that you "like the part in *Body Double* where the woman ... gets drilled by the power drill ... the best," she doesn't respond; she hands you the tapes "without even looking at" you; it's not even clear that she hears you – all she says is "Sign here." But when you start shooting a girl with a nail gun and you urge her to "scream," she does "start screaming" (245), and when you cut out her tongue with some scissors and she can't scream any more, the "blood" that "gushes out of her mouth" (246) is just as good as, even better than, the screaming. Because this is how women talk to you: "Everytime I talk to one of you," Abhor says in Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*, "I feel like I'm taking layers of my own epidermis, which are layers of still freshly bloody scar tissue ... and tearing each one of them off so more and more of my blood shoots into your face. This is what writing is to me a woman."<sup>67</sup> In Ellis, making a woman bleed is a way of talking to her; in Acker, bleeding is the way she talks back.

Both these texts are, of course, notorious for their representations of violence and, although Ellis's sexual politics might look in some respects very different from Acker's (the publication of *American Psycho* was delayed by feminist objections and when the book did appear, it was generally regarded as misogynistic; Acker, however, has sometimes been read as a feminist and never read as a misogynist), the gendered speech acts in both texts have the same non-reciprocal – only women bleed – structure. And, indeed, their violence is itself structural, which is just to say that if writing is bleeding, then it is the mere fact of the writing (not the violence the writing represents) that is violent. In the appropriation of the end of *Huckleberry Finn* that ends *Empire of the Senseless*, the boys debate whether to smuggle a pen or a penknife to Abhor for her to use in her escape. Mark wants Abhor to use the penknife to cut off her leg, thus, in the best *Huck Finn* tradition, making escape more difficult. But, in the same tradition, Thivai wants her to use the pen to "write down, with her own blood as ink, how we rescued her, how brave our hearts were, how strong our arms" (200-201). "The pen is mightier than the sword," Acker says, and Thivai's Huck-like "morality" wins out – they give Abhor the pen instead of the penknife. But if you need blood for ink, the superiority of the pen to the sword may look a little less decisive; if you need blood for ink, the pen depends on the penknife, and the real point seems to be that the penknife makes the difference between the pen and the sword disappear. The one requires what the other produces; if you need blood for ink, the representation of violence is subsumed by the violence of representation.

But even though this familiar critical chiasmus clearly has its place in both *American Psycho* and *Empire of the Senseless*, it would be a mistake to understand Patrick Bateman's ambition to carve words into his girls or Abhor's ambition to bleed in the face of her boys as ways of insisting on the violence of representation – not because they don't really involve violence (although, I will argue, there's a way in which they don't) but because they don't really involve representation. It would be one thing to read the words carved into your body; it's another to imagine that you might understand them without being required

---

66 Brett Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York, 1991), 112.

67 Kathy Acker, *Empire of the Senseless* (New York, 1988), 210.

(or even able) to read them. Bateman doesn't exactly imagine that the girl on whose body he writes with **his** penknife (the ice pick) will understand what he's writing in the way, say, that children understand you by trying to figure out which letters you're tracing on their backs. It's the pain the letters make her feel that carries the meaning. And if in Acker, it's one thing to write by making your letters with blood; it's another to write by bleeding. Ellis's misogynistic writing **on** the body is here matched by Acker's feminist writing **with** the body; the affect is different but the scene of writing is the same – it is the meeting of two bodies, the intermingling of bodily fluids. The happy end of this fantasy is Abhor and Thivai turned into Huck and Jim on the raft: we "talked to each other about nothing, the way people talk to each other when they don't have to listen to the other person cause they've partly melded into the other person" (191). Bateman's efforts of communication – the carving, the rapes – are the unhappy end. But – happy or unhappy – it's the melding, the redescription of communication as penetration, the idea of what Neal Stephenson calls "words" that can "sink right into your brainstem," that emerges as central in these texts.<sup>68</sup>

In Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, such words are understood on the model of the "virus" and are, for the purposes of the plot, instantiated in a particularly powerful "metavirus," "the atomic bomb of informational warfare" (200). One way this virus spreads is through a drug called Snow Crash, made up of the "blood serum" of people who are already infected; language here is imagined as a biological entity. But in the cyberpunk tradition, and in science fiction more generally, viruses are also digital entities. So Snow Crash is also a "digital metavirus, in binary code," one that "can infect computers, or hackers, via the optic nerve" (350). If, in Acker, listening to Abhor means having her blood "shoot into" your face, in Stephenson, reading code means having "your optic nerve" "exposed" to "a hundred thousand bytes of information" (74). It's this exposure that makes your computer crash; more remarkably, it's this exposure that makes the hacker sick. "Why would anyone show me information in binary code?" asks one victim, "I'm not a computer. I can't read a bitmap" (74). And yet, in *Snow Crash*, the bodies of humans are effected by "information" they can't read; the virus, like the ice pick, gets the words inside you even if you haven't read them.

In fact, a good deal of *Snow Crash*'s plot depends upon eliding the distinction between hackers and their computers, as if – indeed, in the novel, just because – looking at code will do to the hacker what receiving it will do to the computer. And if this is rendered implausible on one level by the fact that humans can't interpret bitmaps, it is made plausible on another level by the idea that computers can (by the idea, in other words, that what the computer does with a bitmap is interpret it); "code is just a form of speech – the form that computers understand" (211). So when a computer crashes, what crashes it is a text written in code, a virus. And while it's implausible to think that a text written in binary code – the language computers speak – could crash a person, it's not so implausible to think that a text written in a different kind of code, say, the genetic code, could have the same impact on persons that binary code has on computers. The point, in other words, of the analogy between (or the identification of) the biological virus and (or with) the computer virus is the promotion of the model of the code, which is to say, of the idea that languages are codes. And because the virus that infects you does so not because of what it means but because of what it is – you don't catch a virus by understanding it – it's the model of the

---

68 Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash* (New York, 1992), 395.

virus or code that produces the critique of representation described above. On the one hand, as Richard Powers puts it, "the world" is "awash in messages";<sup>69</sup> indeed, *The Gold Bug Variations* is mainly about the attempt to break the code, the genetic code, in which the most fundamental of these messages are written. So the self-understanding of these texts involves a world entirely composed of messages that need to be decoded, of representations in need of interpretation. On the other hand, however, there is no sense in which the information strings that run through *Snow Crash* or the strings of nucleotides that make up the "miracle sentences" of Powers's "molecular linguistics" are ever interpreted at all. Which is just to say that the body that is infected by a virus does not become infected because it understands the virus any more than the body that does not become infected misunderstands the virus. So the world in which everything – from bitmaps to blood – can be understood as a "form of speech," is also a world in which nothing actually is **understood**, a world in which what a speech act does is disconnected from what it means.

The analogy between the digital virus and the biological virus, between computer code and genetic code thus performs a double function. Its first function is to produce a world in which everything is a text – the great theoretical advance of "modern biologies," Donna Haraway says, is "the translation of the world into a problem of coding" (164), and the idea that, as Jacques Derrida has put it, "the text is not the book, it is not confined in a volume itself confined to the library" but (textuality) is instead intrinsic to "history, to the world, to reality, to being" (137) is surely one of the most influential (and oft repeated) claims of postmodernity. But if the first function of the translation of the world into codes is to make everything a text, its second function, I will be arguing, is to deny that there are such things as texts. Indeed, I will be arguing that the fantasy of a world without texts and without the interpretation of texts (a world, we might say, of information instead of texts) is an essential element of full-blown postmodernism, which is to say, of posthistoricism. And the commitment to – or, at least, the desire for – such a world is expressed not only in the ontological fantasy of the text that is what it's made of (e.g. the transformation of letters written in blood to just blood) but also in the ethical form of that fantasy, the text that, because of the way it's made, can never tell a lie.

Sex in *American Psycho*, for example, features Bateman's desire to hear the "girls" come – as if coming audibly were less a performance than an emanation of the body (like bleeding) – but in order to guarantee their sincerity, he is required not just to make them come but to eviscerate them. After all, their pleasure can be faked in a way that their pain can't – with any plausibility. You can be confident that the girl screaming when you shoot her with a nail gun is not performing (in the sense of faking) her pain in the way that she might be performing (which is to say, faking) her pleasure.<sup>70</sup> Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy produces a more traditionally utopian version of this scenario. She imagines aliens who have never developed the "habit of lying" because they communicate with each other in what she calls "a sensory language," a language in which "relating ... experience by direct neural stimulation, they could give each other whole experiences."<sup>71</sup> Humans, in Butler, lie "easily and often" so they can't "trust one another"; that's why Bateman has to

---

69 Richard Powers, *The Gold Bug Variations* (New York, 1991), 86.

70 Which is to say not that pain can't be faked but only that but it's very difficult to think of someone being shot by a nail-gun as faking.

71 Octavia Butler, *Dawn* (New York, 1987), 237.

use a nail gun to find out what people are really thinking. The Oankali just extend their "sensory arms" and, like Abhor and Thivai and Huck and Jim, meld into each other.

But if the fact that humans lie is a mark of their moral inferiority, it's hard to see how the fact that the aliens don't can count as a mark of their superiority. For insofar as their "sensory language" truly is sensory – insofar as it enables them to "give each other whole experiences" – it makes lying impossible rather than immoral. If, in other words, to speak to someone of your experience is to produce your experience (if the way you tell someone what you experienced is by giving her the experience), then you can't possibly lie. The most you can do by way of concealing is, as Butler's heroine notes, "withholding information, refusing contact" (238). So it makes more sense to think of the Oankali as unable to lie than it does to think of them as unwilling to lie, and it doesn't make much sense to give them moral credit for honesty – why should you get credit for not doing something that you couldn't do even if you wanted to?

The point, however, is not that the Oankali shouldn't get credit for telling the truth; the point is rather that they **aren't** telling the truth, that if they can't lie, they can't really tell the truth either. Insofar as the relevant alternatives are contact/no contact, giving the experience or not giving the experience, telling the truth is as impossible as lying. If, in other words, the Oankali never misrepresent the truth, that is only because they never represent it in the first place. Their "sensory language" relates experience by embodying it rather than representing it, which is to say that, inasmuch as it really is "sensory," it isn't exactly a "language," or, if it is a language, it's a language without propositions, without statements that can be considered true or false. The virus you catch is neither true nor false; the DNA that constructs you is neither true nor false; the blood you shed is neither true nor false – it's a performative, not a performance. The ethical fantasy of speech acts that must be true thus finds its expression in a theoretical fantasy of speech acts that can be neither true nor false, that are instead, in Austin's terminology, felicitous or infelicitous, and the ideal of truth is thus replaced by the ideal of success. The successful performative doesn't tell you the truth, it gets you – in Austin's famous example – married; the biological virus gets you sick, the digital virus destroys your operating system

The question of success or failure, in other words, is a question of effect, and the question of the effect of a speech act, thus construed, can be answered without recourse to the question of its meaning. Indeed, once the crucial thing about the text is its effect, the question of right or wrong interpretations of the text is as irrelevant as the question of its truth or falsehood. Just as the virus can be neither true nor false, no interpretation of the virus can be either accurate or inaccurate – which is just what's meant by saying the body doesn't interpret the virus, it just responds to it; it catches it or it doesn't. When Bateman imagines the "things I could do to this girl's body with a hammer, the words I could carve into her with an ice pick" (112), he is imagining for his reader the production of an experience that will not require her interpretation. Which is just to say, what Wimsatt and Beardsley said some time ago, that it doesn't make sense to think of your experience of a text – the effect the text has on you – as your interpretation of it.

For them, of course, the question of interpretation was usually mixed in with and often subordinated to the question of evaluation, and their commitment to "objectivity" involved them in discounting the relevance of the reader's response to a wide range of phenomena – from Montgomery's strategy at El Alamein to the waterfall in Coleridge's

*Biographia*. Thus the tourist who says the waterfall is pretty provokes Coleridge's disgust, since Coleridge thinks it's sublime. But their point here is not that Coleridge is right and the tourist wrong; their point is rather that one or the other of them must be right, that if the tourist says it's pretty and Coleridge thinks it's sublime, it's not "as if the tourist had said, 'I feel sick,' and Coleridge had thought, 'No, I feel quite well.'"<sup>72</sup> The difference between sublime and pretty is a difference in the object not in the response to it and the point of the commitment to objectivity is not to find some method for determining whether the waterfall really is sublime or pretty, it's just to note that the question of whether something is sublime or pretty is a different kind of question from the question of how it makes you feel. If you say it's sublime and I say it's pretty, we disagree; if you say it makes you sick and I say it doesn't make me sick, we aren't disagreeing, we are just recording the difference between us.

So the main idea of "The Affective Fallacy" was that the question of a text's meaning (like the question of the waterfall's sublimity) is a question about it, whereas the question of its effect is a question about us – how are we feeling? The answer to this question may of course crucially depend on the text, and it may produce a certain kind of objectivity. Wimsatt and Beardsley at least feigned interest in the very crude psychological tests that could be employed to determine people's affective responses to certain words and, of course, the model of the virus provides access to very sophisticated tests about what the effects of a given strain on a given population are likely to be. But when some people catch the virus and some people don't, we don't think of the sick people as disagreeing with the healthy ones. Indeed, this is precisely what it means to begin to conceive the text on the model of the virus; it means to understand differing responses to the text as different effects produced on different bodies by the same cause. The relevant question here will not be whether any individual response is right or wrong, but whether it is normal or abnormal. The normal (what people usually do) replaces the normative (what people ought to do), which means that the attempt to convince people that one interpretation of a text is true and another false is in principle inconceivable (since there can't in principle be any such things as reasons) and must be redescribed as the attempt to impose one's interpretation of a text on others (since if you can't convince people to change their beliefs you are required to coerce them to alter their actions).

This is what it means to think of conflicts of interpretation as, in Derrida's terms, "conflicts of force" and thus to think that they can only be resolved (albeit only provisionally and, in the end, inevitably indefensibly) by the "imposition of meaning" (145). The deconstructive mistake has always been, in Wimsatt and Beardsley's terms, to see the text as the cause of interpretation rather than its object, just as the reader response mistake was simply to reverse the causality and to understand the interpretation as producing the text rather than being produced by it. That's what Stanley Fish meant by insisting that readers write texts rather than read them and that's why conflicts between communities of interpretation were also, since reasons were irrelevant, conflicts of force. Indeed, in their much more influential essay, "The Intentional Fallacy," even Wimsatt and Beardsley found themselves maintaining that because the author's intention could not be used as what they called a "standard" of judgment, it was relevant only as the "cause of a

---

72 W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy," in W.K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington, 1954), 27.

poem" (4). And, in another context, it would be possible to show that if you don't think of texts as meaning what their authors intended, you will end up required to think of them as meaning what they mean to you, which is to say, to think of them as not really meaning at all but just as producing some effect on their readers. In other words, to stick with Wimsatt and Beardsley, if you don't commit the intentional fallacy, you will be required to commit the affective fallacy.

But writers like Ellis and Acker and, especially, Stephenson are not, of course, troubled by the redescription of questions about what the text means as questions about how it makes you feel. In fact, the whole plot of *Snow Crash* revolves around the attempt to destroy the virus without reading it or, what amounts to the same thing, even looking at it, since to look at it is to be infected by it. And the popular response to *American Psycho*, which tended to treat the book as if it were a nail-gun, has found a more moderate and more theoretically sophisticated equivalent in Richard Rorty's response to *Snow Crash*. Novels like *Snow Crash*, Rorty says in his recent book, *Achieving Our Country*, express the loss of what he calls "national hope," and he contrasts their authors with people like Lincoln, Whitman and Dewey, who "tell inspiring stories about episodes and figures in the nation's past."<sup>73</sup> Rorty's point here is not that Stephenson is wrong about America and that his "heroes" are right. In fact, he says, "there is no point in asking whether Lincoln or Whitman or Dewey got America right," since "stories" about "a nation," he thinks, "are not attempts at accurate representation, but rather attempts to forge a moral identity." So the problem with *Snow Crash* is not that it isn't true – after all, it's a story – but that it isn't inspirational.

At the same time, however, as the tribute to "The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature" that ends *Achieving Our Country* makes clear, the problem with *Snow Crash* and books like it is not only that they fail to inspire the "young intellectuals" who read them with "pride in American citizenship" but also that they contribute to a more fundamental failure to appreciate the value of inspiration – and hence of literature – itself. These books produce in their readers the "state of soul" that Rorty calls "knowingness," which he glosses as a "preference for knowledge over hope" (37), and which term – for reasons that will be obvious – he prefers to Harold Bloom's word "Resentment." For, while Rorty agrees with Bloom that English professors are turning the study of literature into "one more dismal social science," his objections are not so much to the "dismal" and the "social" as they are to the "science." It's not resentment his intellectuals prefer to hope; it's "knowledge." So even though Rorty complains that young intellectuals who read Stephenson "often become convinced that they live in a violent, inhuman, corrupt country," his complaint isn't really about what they're becoming convinced of, it's about the fact that they're becoming convinced. Which is just to say that his objection isn't really to what the young intellectuals think they know, it's to their claim to know anything at all – to their "knowingness." Rorty's "knowingness" thus adds a properly philosophical dimension to Bloom's resentment; resentful young intellectuals just have the wrong affect, knowing young intellectuals also have the wrong theory.<sup>74</sup>

In this respect, then – in its comparative indifference to the question of what one knows about a text and its commitment to the question of what the text makes you feel –

---

73 Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge, 1998), 3.

74 More precisely, they're wrong to have any theory at all.

"pride" or "disgust" – *Achieving Our Country* is, interestingly enough, a lot like *Snow Crash* and, indeed, a lot like all the novels I have been discussing: we're not looking for "accurate representations" in or of the virus or the nail gun – we're only interested in how they make us feel. At the same time, however, the analogy between how the virus in *Snow Crash* makes its readers feel (bad) and how *Snow Crash* itself, understood as a virus, makes **its** readers feel (uninspired) may look like nothing but an analogy. Rorty's worry about the effects of texts like *Snow Crash*, that is, may thematize *Snow Crash*'s own conception of text as virus but that doesn't mean that readers like Rorty understand texts to function in the way that a virus does. After all, the point of the virus, I have argued, is that it does not need to be interpreted, indeed that the effect it produces on the reader has nothing to do with its meaning and that, as virus, it can't really be said to have any meaning. Whereas the texts that either do or don't inspire Rortyan readers presumably produce their effect primarily by way of their meaning. When Whitman writes "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem," the pride we (we Americans, at least) are supposed to feel is presumably made available to us only through our interpretation of the text. The important thing may be the "shudders of awe" that Rorty says great works of literature produce in us, but the shudders don't replace our interpretation, they follow from it.

In fact, however, for the pragmatist, the shudders – or at least a response that has their status – come first. For the Romantic conception of literature that Rorty understands himself to be championing in *Achieving Our Country* is anticipated in his work by a defense of Romanticism that speaks more precisely to the formal questions I have been addressing. The contribution of Romanticism, he says in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989), was its promotion of "speaking differently" over "arguing well" in the hierarchy of human talents. To argue for a position is to give the reasons why you think it's right; the legacy of the Romantics was the ability (acquired, Rorty says, "somehow") "to juggle several descriptions of the same event without asking which one was right" (39), and nothing is more crucial to all of Rorty's writing than his hostility to "the whole terminology of 'getting right' and 'representing accurately'" (37). So the pointlessness of asking whether Whitman "got America right" is matched by the pointlessness of asking whether we're getting Whitman right. Questions about whether your interpretation of something is right, questions about whether your account is "true" or "false," are the characteristic questions of the school of "knowingness."

But if we are interested in asking whether the text made us shudder and not in asking whether our description of its meaning is right or wrong, in what sense are we interested in its meaning at all? The minute we see no point in asking whether we got a text right or wrong – more precisely, since I'm not trying to make a psychological point here – the minute we imagine that our interpretation of a text **is** neither right nor wrong, we cease to understand ourselves as interpreting the text at all and begin to understand ourselves as instead registering its effect on us. What **would** be our accounts of the text's meaning – the sort of thing about which we might disagree – become instead our accounts of what it makes us think of. If you say that *American Psycho* makes you think of your grandfather and I say that it makes me think of my grandfather, we are not disagreeing about our interpretations of *American Psycho*, first because we aren't disagreeing – we're just thinking about different things – and, second, because we aren't interpreting *American Psycho* – we're just saying what it makes us think of. And the same thing is true even if

what *American Psycho* makes you think of is how American corporate capitalism is structured by homophobic misogyny. The fact that homophobic misogyny sounds at least a little more like what *American Psycho* really is about than your grandfather does doesn't bridge the gap between what a text makes us think of and what we think it means; on the contrary, it dramatizes just how unbridgeable that gap is because it makes it clear that even if the text made us think of exactly what it was about, what it made us think of would still be a fact about us while what it was about would still be a fact about it.

So readers who prefer "hope" to "knowledge" will also prefer response (inspired or not) to interpretation (true or false). And when there are conflicts between such readers — not when they have different interpretations but when they are differently inspired — pragmatism's strategies of conflict management must inevitably be those that are relevant to what Derrida calls "conflicts of force." "The fundamental premise" of *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, "is that a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance" (189). In one sense, of course, all this means is that beliefs may still be **true** even if caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance, which is to say that beliefs may turn out to be true whatever their cause, which is to say that the cause of a belief is irrelevant to the question of whether it's true, and that true beliefs may be worth dying for. But, also of course, the question of whether a belief is true is the kind of question that preoccupies the students in the school of "knowingness." The inspired don't care whether their beliefs are true, and we have already noted the appropriateness, indeed the inevitability, of the eagerness for martyrdom once the question of truth has been deemed irrelevant. The way to defend those beliefs that seem to you true is to give your reasons for believing them — that's why the knowing are committed to "arguing well." But just as the point of redescribing your beliefs as your language was to make arguing for them unnecessary, the point of redescribing your beliefs as your feelings (your interpretations as your responses) is to make arguing for them both irrelevant and impossible. It's impossible because you can't give any reasons that justify your feelings (the most you can do is explain why you have them); it's irrelevant because you don't need any reasons to justify your feelings. You're entitled to them without having to justify them. So the pragmatist is prepared to die for his beliefs not despite the fact that they don't seem true to him but **because** they don't seem true to him. It's because he can't give any reasons that he's so eager to give his life.

Hence the complete continuity between the pragmatism of *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* and the patriotism of *Achieving Our Country*. Pragmatism has always been committed to treating your beliefs as if they were your country, perfecting "my country, right or wrong" (a slogan that acknowledges considerations of right and wrong but subordinates them to a higher loyalty) with "my beliefs, neither right nor wrong" (which eliminates the need for any higher loyalty and which makes fighting for your beliefs — rather than arguing for them — the appropriate course of action). And it is, of course, the irrelevance of argument — which requires, as I've been trying to show, the transformation of texts into information (letters into blood) and so of meaning into force (intentions into infections, or inspiration) — that makes Rorty, like Stephenson, a posthistoricist writer. History ended (in 1989) because the Soviet Union, as a distinctive ideological entity, collapsed, and, insofar as the Cold War was imagined by Fukuyama and Huntington as a

war between beliefs – between liberalism and socialism – its end made ideological disagreement and political argument obsolete. But just as pragmatism perfects patriotism, posthistoricism in general improves upon the merely historical claims of the political scientists by turning what they thought of as an empirical event – the end of political disagreement – into a theoretical condition – the impossibility of any disagreement. And in a world of differences without disagreements, it is, of course, identities that matter; the relevant thing about you is not what you believe but who you are, who you were and who you want to be. In this respect, *Achieving Our Country*, concerned with "our nation's self-identity" (4) takes its place alongside books like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and even, although Rorty criticizes it along with *Snow Crash*, Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*. The relevant identity in *Achieving Our Country* is American, rather than African-American, Native American or Jewish, but all these books are about those "contingent historical circumstances" that have produced their authors (when causes replace reasons, historicism will naturally loom large) and they all understand themselves as technologies for the production of that paradigmatically identitarian emotion, "pride."

There is obviously a theoretical link between this historicism and the repudiation of representation that I have been discussing, if only because one's responses have histories rather than justifications – which is to say, their histories are taken to be their justifications. That's why Art's father in *Maus* is said to "bleed" history (Abhor bleeds literature), and that's why Silko's Indians execute the Cuban Marxist for "crimes against history": he wants to tell them what to do, they want to tell him who they are. And that's also why, as readers of his most recent novel, *Cryptonomicon*, know, Stephenson dislikes the same intellectuals Bloom and Rorty do. He too is proud of being an American, and he too expresses that pride by telling what Rorty calls "inspiring stories about episodes and figures in the nation's past" (3). In fact, *Cryptonomicon* is one of several contributions – including Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* and Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation* – to the recent effort to give World War Two the inspirational status for generically white Americans that, say, the revolt of Huteuy in 1510 has for Silko's Indians. But Brokaw and especially Spielberg emphasize the battlefield exploits of their heroes – indeed, *Saving Private Ryan*'s representation of the D-Day assault on Normandy's beaches was widely praised for a realism that went beyond representation, and that, in making its viewers feel that they were actually participating in the Normandy invasion, might be described in the present context as taking at least a step toward justifying their pride in actions that they had not, of course, actually performed; the intensity of identification at least makes the pride plausible. Stephenson, however, describes *Cryptonomicon* as mainly about the contribution of what he calls "technically inclined people" to the war effort.<sup>75</sup> Thus, although one of his war heroes is a marine, the other is a "hacker," and the novel's project is not only to link the hackers of today (working on the internet) with the "great wartime hackers" (breaking Nazi codes) (which it does in the usual way, making the former the descendants of the latter) but, what's more of a challenge, to make the hackers (of yesterday and today) as heroic as the marines.

That's where the Bloomian hostility to cultural studies comes in. One of the villains of *Cryptonomicon* is the about-to-be ex-girlfriend of the heroic computer programmer; she's an assistant professor of something Humanities-like and when the novel begins she's

---

75 Neal Stephenson, *Cryptonomicon* (New York, 1999), Acknowledgments.

participating in a conference called "War as Text," devoted to sweeping war and the soldiers who fight it into "the ash-bin of posthistorical discourse" (52). The complaint here looks like the familiar one: when you treat things as texts, you deny their reality. But, as we've already seen, the bad transformation of world into text can be made good by the redescription of text as code. The penknife replaces the pen; if you turn "War as Text" into "War as Code," you make it possible to think of the marines and the cryptographers not only as collaborating but as actually doing the same thing – interacting with information. So the posthistoricism in the ash-bin is recycled – the proliferation of texts comes back as the disappearance of textuality.

It is the commitment to this recycling that I have described as characterizing the novel at the end of history. More generally, it is the description of the text as mark or virus, and its consequent transformation into an object of experience rather than interpretation that provides the ontology for the political and epistemological positions of posthistoricism (for the valorization of difference and identity). The political position is that ideological differences have been replaced by differences that should be understood on the model of cultural or linguistic differences. (Capitalism may have triumphed over socialism but the battles between cultures have just begun.) The epistemological position is that such differences, properly understood, make disagreement – with its unavoidable commitment to the idea that some beliefs are true and others false, some interpretations right and others wrong – impossible. (No language is right or wrong; conflicts on the model of conflicts between languages have to do with force not truth.) The ontological position – the transformation of the object of interpretation, the sign, into the object of experience, the mark – turns disagreement about the meaning of texts into the registration of their different effects. Readers at the end of history bleed, or not; they differ but they don't disagree. And they don't disagree because they have nothing to disagree about.

The point of "Against Theory's" call for the end of theory, on the other hand, was to give them something to disagree about. If the project of the end of history is to imagine a world of differences without disagreements, the "Against Theory" project was to explain disagreement – what the author intended mattered because what the author intended was what interpreters disagreed about. This was what was meant by denying that intentionalism had any methodological value – it didn't help you get at the truth about what a text meant, it just explained why you could think that there **was** some truth about what a text meant. Of course, there have been literary theories committed to denying the possibility of true (or false) interpretations of texts – indeed, I have been arguing that **every** theory must be committed to making true and false interpretations impossible and thus to eliminating interpretation itself, and that the end of history is just another name for the end of interpretation. But even if it may be true that no one any longer thinks that capitalism is wrong, it is not true that no one thinks that anything is wrong, and it is certainly not true that anyone – except, perhaps, in theory – thinks that there are no more misinterpretations. Which is just to say that, if history has ended, it has only ended in theory; theory is already over in history.