# Editorial

Hello!

Late twentieth century Euro-American culture has been marked by the unsettling of many of the familiar grids through which its powerfully stable notions of knowledge, subjectivity, identity, otherness, reality, politics and nature have been constituted. The static authority of such notions has been prised open. We are situated in a moment of intense fragmentation; a moment of possibility and a moment of increasing danger. The spaces opened by this fragmentation are ones that offer many promises. What such promises will generate remains in question.

Danger and possibility: these are key signs through which the articles collected in this issue of ***Undercurrents*** speak. As both a historical condition and a political practice, the effect of fragmenting promises the very possibility of contesting the static and totalizing conditions of what might be called *the discourse of author-ity.* It also promises new kinds of monsters.

As Jeff Culbert argues, one central feature of the discourse of author-ity has been how it has institutionalized, encoded, and universalized cognition, or what some might call logocentricism, as the *modus operandi* of Western culture. Our consumption with establishing immutable truth and knowledge has produced what Culbert calls "the tyranny of the thinker"--a hyper-cognitive, anthropocentric figure that closes off all other possible forms of human and inter-species relations for sake of stabilizing the discursive power of knowledge. This apparently immutable and deeply privileged position of human-as-knower has been a regressive ground for various strains of modernist projects, including elements of Green politics. For Culbert, the centrality and fixity of this figure is in serious need of displacement if any "fundamental re-evaluation of ourselves in the world" is to take place.

The discourse of author-ity has also been intimately bound-up with colonialism and the construction of the Other. As Donald Gordon's critical essay attempts to show, neo-colonial impositions of the North American rhetorics of preservation and conservation onto the landscapes of Africa has ultimately been the attempt to inscribe an ideological image of the North onto the South. Such practices belie the cultural specificity and diversity of the post-colonial "South". And as a result, they ignore both the degree to which nature is necessarily inclusive of humans and that in the contexts of the "South" such an inclusion is crucial to any kind of preservation or conservation practices and policies. As Gordon notes, such an acknowledgement of the specific contexts of the periphery "unnerves our political system" and along with it the authoritative canon of North American conservation.

The projection of certain ideological and cultural matrices onto the bodies of non-European others--human and nonhuman--have been crucial to the economy of desire produced by particular forms of ecotourism. Again the discourse of author-ity is mapped into another unstable configuration. Constance Russel's paper explores this economy of desire through a retelling of her own visit to an orangutan conservation project in Indonesia. Orangutans, as boundary creatures occupying the space between culture and nature, have become central figures in the imaginations and narratives of ecotourists. What such imaginings and narratives produce are sometimes startling, and perhaps dangerous, constructions of the nonhuman other.

In a related piece, Sara Kerr's bitterly ironic meanderings into the world of advertising show that such

projections onto the "other", can work in reverse ways as well, through the writing of sex and nature into women's bodies. Advertising, like the eco-tour, appeals to originary, naturalized, and thus authorative moments to consolidate its own system of meaning.

As much as discourses of author-ity impose or delimit particular forms of knowledge, their apparent hegemony is never absolute. In fact, such discourses, which often provide the epistemological ground of Euro-American environmentalists, are wholly inadequate tropes for providing positions of understanding. As Sinith Sitthiraksa shows, they ignore and attempt to dislocate the power and memory of third world local and folk knowledges that can provide crucial elements of an environmental education. Using a photo essay as a tool for memory work, Sitthiraksa re-establishes the knowledge produced and practiced by her mother in Bangkok as an essential part of her own environmental sensibilities. This is a personal knowledge, a personal story. Yet it is one that is also part of particular Thai folkloric histories. It is a kind of counter-knowledge. But how North American readers and viewers engage with this knowledge remains in question. As Sitthiraksa asks: "What can they learn from a third-world Mom's life story?"

Fragmenting the multiply-inflected discourse of author-ity, as each of these essays attempts, opens different conditions of possibility; different types of vision and relationality. Totalized realities have become deeply contested. For some, new conditions of possibility lay within the mindscapes of virtual reality. Here is where danger and possibility seriously intersect in the spaces open by fragmentation. Brent Wood heralds this moment of a virtual world, where reality and illusion, self and other, art and science collapse into one another, as place where new fictions of environmentalism can be written. Things are messy and confused in virtualized contexts and disruptive of all familiar referents and discourses of author-ity.

Yet the promises of virtual reality can be very dystopian. Such is true when the illusory boundary-crossing of virtual reality becomes actualized through biotechnology and genetic engineering. Jane Horsley maps the dense politics of these rapidly emerging fields. Biotechnology, and in particular the increasing interest in DNA manipulation, has been a site where questions of ethics, rights, patents, legality, nature, humanity, knowledge and power all intersect. Biotechnology is a fragmenting, gene-splitting practice productive of dangerous possibilities and brutally "real" effects. In the context of late capitalist society the fragmentation of one form of authority--rigid boundaries--may potentially be replaced with other, more fluid forms of power which maintain the omnipotence of particular human subjects. As biotechnology and virtual reality show, we have entered a moment of few guarantees.

Thanks.

The Editorial Collective