

The Shape of the Signifier

Walter Benn Michaels

This essay begins with a question: “The question is, what is Mars’s own name for itself?”¹ The question gets asked in *Green Mars*, the second volume of Kim Stanley Robinson’s Mars trilogy; 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, and so on. 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 a sound that “a whole lot of Earth names for Mars” have in them, Robinson says (*GM*, p. 236). 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 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.

1. Kim Stanley Robinson, *Green Mars* (New York, 1994), p. 45; hereafter abbreviated *GM*.

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."² And this concern with Mars's indigenous population appears also in Bova's *Mars* that, like the Mars trilogy, contains no Martians but that, 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."³ 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 (*M*, p. 97). So, later, when Jamie discovers "formations of rock" 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" (*M*, pp. 225, 226–27). 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

2. Robinson, *Blue Mars* (1996; New York, 1997), p. 360; hereafter abbreviated *BM*.

3. Ben Bova, *Mars* (New York, 1992), p. 10; hereafter abbreviated *M*.

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that 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 (*M*, p. 11).

Bova's *Mars* is thus not only a narrative of New World exploration, it's also a kind of *Roots* for Martians. The parallel to Columbus's arrival in the Americas is complicated, of course, because 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."⁴ That is, basically all the peoples of the southwest seem to have arrived there from somewhere else; their indigenesness 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 (*BM*, p. 369). 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 narratives 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 twenties, so frequently accompanied the appeal to the American Indian and even to Mesa Verde.⁵ 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—Mesa Verde makes resistance to Americanization possible for Jamie and confirms it for him on Mars—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

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

5. 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, N.C., 1995).

precisely, it is 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.⁶

Bova's *Mars* was published in 1992, the year of the Columbus quincentennial; Robinson's *Red Mars* was published in 1993, proclaimed by 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.⁷ 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" ("I," p. 26). Most human beings have "separated themselves from the land and nature," but "indigenous people are one with the land," and "it is through their voice that nature can speak to us."⁸ 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."⁹ 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 (*BM*, p. 252); "our bodies are made of atoms that until recently were part of the [Martian] regolith" (*GM*, p. 506), so "we can speak for the land" (*BM*, p. 272).

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

6. 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.

7. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, foreword, *Voice of Indigenous Peoples: Native People Address the United Nations*, ed. Alexander Ewen (Santa Fe, 1994), p. 9. Many of those involved in the project had wanted 1992 to be the Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples; according to the Native American Council of New York City, the collective authors of the introduction to *Voice of Indigenous Peoples*, "pressure from Spain, Brazil, and the United States, among others" made that impossible (Native American Council of New York City, "Introduction: An Indigenous Worldview," *Voice of Indigenous Peoples*, p. 21; hereafter abbreviated "I").

8. The first and third quotations are from Thomas Banyacya, untitled speech, *Voice of Indigenous Peoples*, p. 115. The second quotation is from William Means, untitled speech, *Voice of Indigenous Peoples*, p. 60.

9. Banyacya, untitled speech, p. 115.

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.¹⁰ 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 also articulates a commitment to respecting the rights of others who are not people.¹¹ “One had to let things speak for themselves,” Robinson writes, “This was perhaps true of all phenomena. Nothing could be spoken for. One could only walk over the land, and let it speak for itself” (*BM*, p. 96).

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 “forerunner of Mesa Verde”) (*M*, p. 226, 225, 227). 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.

10. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York, 1996), pp. 80–81.

11. 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 speak a language (Stone, *Should Trees Have Standing?* [New York, 1996], p. 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.

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" (*GM*, p. 349).

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; 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:

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.¹² "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."¹³ 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," he doesn't think that the moose were leaving messages for the hunters in the hunters' tribal language.¹⁴ Rather the moose left traces of their presence, and these traces are indeed entirely physical, formal. That is, their shape is the only thing about them that matters; the differ-

12. Steven Knapp and Michaels, "Against Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Summer 1982): 728.

13. John R. Searle, "Literary Theory and Its Discontents," *New Literary History* 25 (Summer 1994): 649–50.

14. Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 95.

ence 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; 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 *as* look like *rs* 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*.¹⁵

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

15. In response to an earlier version of this argument (outlined in Knapp and Michaels, "Reply to John Searle," *New Literary History* 25 [Summer 1994]: 669-74), 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" (Searle, "Structure and Intention in Language," *New Literary History* 25 [Summer 1994]: 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 people who produced them? They can, at best, tell you what letters they were trying to write, not what letters they have actually written.

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*; 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 say which perspective is the most beautiful or which perspective is the most interesting, but you obviously can't say 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 because, 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 seventies and early eighties 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 eighties and the nineties.¹⁶ That is, the redescription of difference of opinion (the differ-

16. 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).

ence 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 posthistorical 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”—goes on to specify the right of indigenous peoples “to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.”¹⁷ If we value “Mars's own name for itself,” it cannot be because we think that name is correct; how could a name for something in one language (say, Martian) be more correct than a 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 turned into dislike of the fact that they are different, and the desire to convince them of the truth must be turned into 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 only appropriate 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.

One name for this recourse to difference and (it amounts to the same thing) identity has been the end of history. Texts like Francis Fukuyama's “The End of History?” and Samuel Huntington's “The Clash of Civilizations?” have made what we might characterize as essentially empirical arguments for the replacement of disagreement by difference. The crucial fact for them has been the end of the cold war and thus of predominantly ideological conflict. In ideological conflicts, Huntington says, the “key

17. *United Nations Draft Declaration of Indigenous Peoples Rights*, in *Voice of Indigenous Peoples*, pp. 159, 165.

question was ‘Which side are you on?’; in ‘conflicts between civilizations, the question is ‘What are you?’”¹⁸ Insofar as the cold war configured the differences between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. 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 independently 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 twentieth 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,” he identifies not merely a political but a theoretical shift: conflicting nations assert the importance of their interests; conflicting ideologies assert the truth of their views.¹⁹

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 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

18. Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” in *The New Shape of World Politics* (New York, 1997), p. 71. See also Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989): 3–18. The following four paragraphs are drawn from my discussion of Huntington in “Political Science Fictions,” *New Literary History* (forthcoming). For more on conflict in Fukuyama (and, in particular, on the similarities between Fukuyama and Richard Rorty), see Michaels, “Posthistoricism,” *Transition* 70 (Summer 1996): 4–19.

19. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” p. 68.

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 make sense. Posthistoricist thinkers often criticize the appeal to universality as an attempt to compel agreement, and they remind us that standards of universality are themselves only local. 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; if we cannot appeal to universal truths as grounds for adjudicating our disagreements, that is only 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 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. 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), difference without disagreement makes the subject-position essential (since to differ without disagreeing is nothing more than to occupy a different subject-position). And this essentializing of the subject-position does not depend on any account of that position which might be called essentialist. Because it has nothing to do with the question of what determines the subject-position (race, culture, sex, gender) and has to do only with the relevance of the subject-position, however determined, identity plays the same role in (so-called) antiessentialist accounts of the subject as it does in essentialist accounts. That's why indigenous people, "those of us," the Native American Council of New York City says, "who have lived on the lands of our ancestors since the beginning of history" can come to play so crucial a role in the discourse of the end of history ("I," p. 19). For, despite the racial overtones of the invocation of their ancestors, indigenous people define themselves in principle through an appeal to place, not race. This is Robinson's point when he insists that the important thing about his Martians is not only not their ideology but not their race or culture either—the important thing is just that they are from Mars.

And, more generally, we might say not only that you don't need to

belong to a race or a sex or a culture for your subject-position to be crucial, you don't even need to come from a place; 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 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).²⁰ 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 is to understand all differences as differences in what, who, or where we are and thus to make it seem that the fundamental question—the question that separates the postideological left from the postideological right—is the question of our attitude toward difference: the Left wants to celebrate difference, the Right wants to overcome it.

Wherever we might want to locate ourselves on this axis, however, 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. In literary theory, this movement takes place in what Derrida has called the “substitution of ‘mark’ for ‘sign,’”²¹ 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

20. 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.

21. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, Ill., 1988), p. 66. Derrida couples the substitution of the mark for the sign with the “substitution of intentional effect for intention” (p. 66), 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.

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 that 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”²²—will, like Huntington and Fukuyama, produce differences without differences of opinion, conflicts without disagreements.

Butler calls these differences “conflict[s] of interpretation,” and she identifies them as products of what she describes as “a permanent diversity within the semantic field” that, 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” (*ES*, pp. 87, 91). One of the points of *Excitable Speech* is thus to argue against hate speech laws that, 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” (*ES*, p. 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 a conflict over which interpretation of an utterance is correct into a 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

22. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York, 1997), p. 40; hereafter abbreviated *ES*.

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 posthistoricist identitarianism of Huntington and Fukuyama (*ES*, p. 40).²³ 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 means²⁴—any conflict between you and me about what *queer* means is just 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 (Donna Haraway thus claims that the insights of postmodern theory will enhance our ability to “contest for meanings”)²⁵ 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 one’s 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 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.²⁶ 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

23. Actually, this formulation is a little unfair to Fukuyama, since his point, of course, is that the end of contradiction (a.k.a. the triumph of liberalism) marks an end to politics. Butler’s particular contribution is to turn the end into the beginning.

24. 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.

25. Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London, 1991), p. 154.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

language” and, “although we will speak with one voice, we will have nothing to say.”²⁷ The commitment to difference without disagreement appears here in its purest possible form because 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.’”²⁸ 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 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 (*ES*, p. 91). 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

27. Boutros-Ghali, foreword, pp. 13, 14, 15.

28. Derrida, *Limited Inc*, p. 61.

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” (*ES*, pp. 87–88). Insofar as the risk Butler describes is the risk of misinterpretation, then it must be true that everyone always takes it; 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. *That* risk 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.

This essay began by contrasting two different ways of being interested in language on Mars: Ben Bova’s interest in the language spoken by its natives and Kim Stanley Robinson’s interest in a language that could be understood as that of the planet itself. Part of the point of the essay has been that these contrasting interests are also importantly complementary, that Robinson’s interest in the shapes of Martian rocks is linked in principle to Bova’s interest in preserving the language of Native Americans or Martians. To put the point in more properly theoretical terms, I have tried to show that 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 writer’s and the reader’s) primary. And, to put the point in more properly historical terms, I have suggested that these simultaneous commitments to materiality and identity should be understood as core contributors to the end of history—to the end, that is, as announced by Fukuyama and as imagined by writers like Huntington, Derrida, Butler, and Haraway, of distinctively ideological difference.

Unlike, however, those writers who responded to deconstruction and other developments in the literary theory of the seventies and eighties by worrying about how—in the face of what seemed to them a destructive skepticism—we might still achieve knowledge about the meaning of texts and, unlike also those writers who responded to the multiculturalism of the nineties by worrying about how—in the face of what seemed to them a destructive particularism—we might achieve political unity, I have not been interested in the supposedly catastrophic epistemological and political consequences of deconstruction and multiculturalism. More specifi-

cally, I have not been interested in the possibilities of agreement, interpretive or political, much less in strategies for achieving it. My interest has been rather in the conditions of disagreement, in what we have to think to think of ourselves as disagreeing. With respect to literary theory, I have argued that to identify the text with the shape of the signifier is to make disagreement about its meaning impossible; that is—turning the point around—if we disagree about the meaning of a text we are already committed to identifying that text by an appeal to the intentions of its author. And, with respect to political theory, I have argued similarly that the primacy of identity makes disagreement impossible and the possibility of disagreement makes identity irrelevant. So, although the theoretical commitment to the materiality of the signifier may look very different from the theoretical commitment to the primacy of the subject, they are, in fact, the same commitment—anti-intentionalism and identitarianism are the same project.

Or, to put the point more sharply, they make the same mistake. I conclude by characterizing these projects as mistaken not simply because I *believe* they are but because I take myself in describing them to have *shown* that they are. In part, this demonstration has consisted only in showing that the transformation of the sign into the mark, of the letter into the shape, requires the transformation of the reader's interpretation of a text into the reader's experience of the text with the immediate consequence that there must be as many meanings as readers. But, of course, for many, this *reductio ad absurdum* will hardly seem absurd; indeed, it will seem to them that the chief advantage of the transformation of sign into shape is to explain exactly why it is that no text can have a single meaning and that, in demonstrating the intimacy between the commitments to indeterminacy and identity, I have provided something more like a defense than a critique of both positions. But I have also argued that the replacement of the sign by the shape not only makes meanings infinite but makes disagreement impossible—which is just to say that when the same shapes mean different things to different people, the different people cannot be described as disagreeing. And this is a conclusion that, if it is true, is harder to accept with equanimity. For we very often feel that we do disagree with people; indeed, if we are literary critics, we may feel that our disagreement with other literary critics is at the core of what we do. Every time that I write about a literary text, I have the sense that I disagree with a great many people about what that text means and, after publishing what I write, I often have the sense both that a great many people feel they disagree with me and that they are right, that they really do disagree with me. But if they and I are right, if we really do disagree, then it is a mistake to think that our subject-positions matter, and it is also a mistake—in fact, the same mistake—to think that the signifier is its shape.