

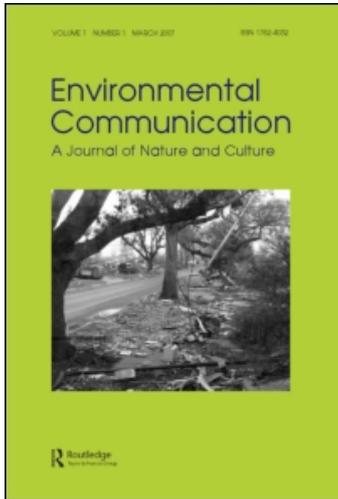
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“Somethin’ Tells Me It’s All Happening at the Zoo”: Discourse, Power, and Conservationism¹

Tema Milstein

This study examines how certain Western institutional discourses reproduce particular human relationships with nature. The analysis focuses upon the institutional setting of the zoo, examining long-standing multi-voiced debates about zoos and exploring the contemporary zoo’s conservation discourses and cultural, lexical, and spatial elements of gaze and power. The author contextualizes zoo discourses within Western ideological environmental dialectics, including those of Mastery–Harmony, Othering–Connection, and Exploitation–Idealism. The author relates these discussions to her empirical observations of how certain discursive themes are reproduced and complicated within a leading American zoo. In the tradition of critical research that advocates for social change, the essay concludes with analysis-driven discussion about possibilities for zoos to transform their core configurations to more progressively work as agents for systemic cultural and environmental change.

Keywords: Discourse; Culture; Ideology; Dialectics; Conservation; Power; Nature; Zoo; Environmental Communication; Participant–Observation; Systemic Cultural and Environmental Change; Mastery–Harmony; Othering–Connection; Exploitation–Idealism; Gaze

This study examines an institutional discourse to analyze how sites ostensibly dedicated to the protection of animals’ welfare and resistance to industry-driven approaches to the environment are mediated by dominant ideological premises that both precondition and reproduce particular human relationships with nature. I network across several disciplinary boundaries to inform my theoretical framework and position environmental communication research to serve as a bridge connecting

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the environmental realm to the socio-cultural. In interconnecting extant scholarly discussion with an empirical analysis of an everyday popular public space, my goal is to generate useful and provocative questions, analysis, critique, and possible alternatives that position the zoo as a possible site for greater human–nature connection and action.

The study is in league with interdisciplinary, ongoing endeavors to ecologically expand critical discursive theory. Like many environmental communication and interdisciplinary critical environmental scholars, my exploration emerges from an underlying claim that discourses not only serve to structure, oppress, and transform human lives, but so, too, do discourses serve to symbolically and materially construct, constrain, and change the more than human world. The exploration of the role of discourse in human destruction of the environment and oppression of other species is of central concern because, even though human power over nature is decidedly materially experienced, the material practices themselves are both justified and reinforced via processes and systems of discourse, or representation (Cox, 2007; Stibbe, 2001).

To examine how, in particular, Western institutional zoo discourses materially and symbolically construct nature and animals, I first contextualize such discourses within dominant Western ideological environmental frameworks, reviewing Mastery–Harmony, Othering–Connection, and Exploitation–Idealism discursive dialectics. I then focus my analysis upon the institutional setting of the zoo, examining long-standing multi-voiced debates about zoos and exploring the more contemporary zoo’s emergent conservation discourses and cultural, lexical, and spatial elements of gaze and power. I relate these discussions to my empirical observations of zoo discourse, analyzing how certain discursive themes are reproduced in a specific case study of a leading American zoo, even when the outcome may be in opposition to some of the zoo’s educational and advocacy goals. Finally, in the tradition of critical research that advocates for social change, I conclude with a discussion driven by my analysis about possibilities for zoos to transform their core configurations to more progressively work as agents for systemic change in contemporary human–nature relations.

Mastery–Harmony, Othering–Connection, Exploitation–Idealism Dialectics

Fairclough (2002, p. 91) suggests that “discursive practices are ideologically invested in so far as they incorporate significations which contribute to sustaining or restructuring power relations.” Following Fairclough’s argument, discursive practices that incorporate significations of nature, animals, and certain people as subordinated “others” will inevitably be loaded with ideology that contributes to reinforcing the structure of power relations. At the same time, discourses do not merely function within one dominant ideology. Instead, examinations of discourses often reveal multiple ideologies in tension—as dominant ideologies assert and reproduce themselves, so, too, do alternative ideologies resist and challenge dominant ways of thinking and doing. Marafiotte and Plec (2006) explore how

various, and often seemingly conflicting, discourses (such as anthropocentrism and ecocentrism) can be found within individual utterances. Using this heteroglossic and dialogic lens, it would follow that various, and at times conflicting, discourses would also be found in elements of zoo discourse. Furthermore, it would follow that conflicting discourses would be in processes of tension with one another, exhibiting oppositional dialectic poles even as they circulate together in the symbolic–material space of the zoo.

I offer three dialectics that hold sway in environmental discourse and, I propose, are also dialogically prevalent in zoo discourse. First, in the West, an enduring and deeply embedded discourse ties *mastery* over nature to societal progress (Gamson, 1988). In the Americas, for instance, alternative symbolic–material discourses of adaptivity or reciprocity with nature practiced by many pre-colonial cultures were largely devastated by European colonists who brought with them a mastery-oriented way of seeing and acting upon the human place in the natural world. Gamson, however, also points to a countertheme within mainstream Western discourse, one made familiar in the late eighteenth century and nineteenth century writings of Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman in the USA and of Wordsworth in England, that of valuing *harmony* with nature married to the belief that industrial progress threatens to disrupt such harmony. When considering the *mastery–harmony* dialectic that permeates much Western communication about nature, Gamson argues that those who wish to challenge the mastery theme should keep the cultural ambivalence or tension between these two themes of mastery and harmony in mind. “While authorities may attempt to exploit particular cultural themes in any struggle, one cannot invoke the theme without making the countertheme relevant as well, and therein may lie opportunity” (p. 221).

Second, Western discursive practices are embedded with a preponderance of modernist human environment ideational dualities (Carbaugh, 1996; Plumwood, 1993). Much institutional discourse, including that of science (Haraway, 1989), religion (Patterson, 2002), and globalization (Shiva, 1997), depends upon differentiating humans as the standard dominant group from other animals, nature, and at times other humans—these others, in turn, are often framed as subordinated others. This *othering* often serves not only to justify exploitive views and practices, but also to divorce humans from the knowledge that they are, in fact, animals and part of nature themselves. On the other pole of this second dialectic exists a less prevalent Western belief in human interconnectedness with nature. The *connection* pole gained contemporary voice via the global environmental movements of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, as well as via the similarly timed Western rise of interest in Eastern religion and philosophy, and continues to gain voice via contemporary Green movements that point to humans being one interrelated part of many interdependent parts within overlapping ecosystems.² The connection theme resists dualistic perceptions that frame nature as a subordinated other to humanity, and instead seeks to recognize reciprocity with nature.

The third dialectic features the dominant pole of *exploitation*. Marx (1857–58/1978) argued that “All production is appropriation of nature on the part of an

individual within and through a specific form of society” (p. 266). While Marx failed to acknowledge reproductive work, which by definition renews nature instead of exploiting it, his definition and, far more crucially, the actual practices of production and profit continue to serve to reify nature as something that exists to be appropriated and commodified for ever-increasing accumulation and profits within global political economic frameworks. The opposing pole of this third dialectic is what I term *idealism*, in which circulate the desires to preserve and respect nature, as well as to reverse destructive human impact on nature. Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier (2002) argue the zoo, in particular, serves to disguise the inconsistency of *exploitation–idealism* dialectical impulses by expressing the illusion of certain natural spaces and representing wished-for environmental ideals while the global plunder of natural habitats intensifies unabated. The idealism pole can also be considered as a creative and imaginative force that leads to improved ways to envision and enact human–nature relations. Unlike certain forms of logic that lead toward rationalizations of exploitation, idealism in its creative form can override the logic of domination and the deep structures of dualism that “create ‘blind spots’ in the dominant culture’s understanding of its relationship to the biosphere, understandings which deny dependency and community . . .” (Plumwood, 1993, p. 194).

Taken together the interrelated dialectics of mastery vs. harmony, othering vs. connection, and exploitation vs. idealism inform much of the mainstream discourse about Western and Westernized relationships with the environment. The poles of these dialectics, however, do not receive equal airtime. Contemporary, profit-driven Western processes of excessive mass consumption largely depend upon mastery, othering, and exploitation of nature, animals, and other people. The institutional heft of power and profit motive is put behind these three themes, reaffirming their dominance and leaving little room for the counterthemes of harmony, connection, and idealism. This lopsided representation leads to crystallizations, or discourses that become “so widely accepted and reified, that they themselves become part of a landscape of knowledge seemingly impermeable to change” (Harvey, 1996, p. 81).

Zoos

A dialogic dialectical lens is especially fitting for this essay’s subject, as zoos sit in cultural in-between places of tension. Hanson (2002) argues that not only do zoos’ stated goals of recreation, education, science, and conservation often conflict, but so, too, do zoos occupy “a middle ground between science and showmanship, high culture and low, remote forests and cement cityscape, and wild animals and urban people” (p. 7). Perhaps partly because zoos constitute this liminal cultural space, zoo visiting remains a highly popular leisure activity. American zoos annually experience 150 million visitors—a popular comparison in zoo literature is that visitors to US zoos outnumber the combined American annual attendance of professional baseball, football, basketball, and hockey (aza.org). The contemporary zoo, then, despite

climbing entry prices that can be prohibitive to people with low incomes, is an excellent place to find an institution and much of the general public engaging in daily discourse about nature.

While zoos have always attracted visitors, arguments against zoos mounted in Western countries in the mid-1900s and by the 1970s rose to a constant critique that has shaped much of the ongoing dialogue among zoo professionals, interdisciplinary scholars, animal rights activists, and others (Baratay & Hardouin-Fugier, 2002). Debate has centered on issues such as how animals are mis/treated in zoos, how animals are portrayed in relation to visitors, and how the zoo addresses issues of endangered and threatened species conservation. These confrontations and discussions have contributed to the symbolic and material transformations of many zoos during the past 30–40 years.

The Zoo Debate: Discourse and Conservationism

In response to early public criticism that zoos were cruel to animals, zoos refashioned their stated aims, and in some cases their practices, to be geared less to recreation and entertainment at zoo animals' expense and more to preservation of species and education (Baratay & Hardouin-Fugier, 2002). In recent decades, some zoos have expanded their focus on preserving species through captive breeding to also include programs aimed to protect the captive species' natural habitats and wild relatives, to educate the public about dangers facing wild animals and their environments, and to undertake scientific research aimed at conservation. According to a director of the Department of Conservation and Science for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), contemporary accredited zoos that include such initiatives must continue to ask the central question of whether "the benefits of accredited zoos to society outweigh the cost to individual animal welfare" (Kuehn, 2002). The answer from Western zoos is that the principle ethical justification for their existence is their commitment to conservation. Continuing to keep captive animals is necessary, according to zoos, at least in part because these animals provide practical and valuable information that can help conservation efforts, which may be difficult or impossible to gather in the wild. According to the AZA, in 2006, 194 AZA-member zoos, aquariums, and related facilities conducted or contributed to 1719 conservation, research, and education projects in 98 countries/regions (AZA, 2007).³

Zoo critics, however, argue with equal passion and reason that zoos are conserving little or nothing at all. Counterarguments include the contention that breeding efforts are focused on species that zoos are particularly interested in displaying rather than those most in need, as well as the contention that research on captive animals is very often not applicable to their wild counterparts. At the same time, critics argue, zoos are teaching and reinforcing destructive ways of relating to nature and animals (Norton *et al.*, 1995) by teaching visitors "a false sense of our place in the natural order," in which animals are there at our pleasure to be used for our purposes (Jamieson, 1985). Many critics argue that the zoo in recent decades has co-opted

environmentalist rhetoric in a public relations deluge that anticipates and defuses all concerns about zoos and displaces negative views by pinning them onto the bad, dirty, outdated zoos of the past, an approach critics argue is self-serving and disingenuous (Jamieson, 1995; Malamud, 1998).

Critics also argue that conservationist discourse, the central discourse of the progressive Western zoo, often masks the fact that the vast majority of captive zoo animals are neither threatened nor endangered in the wild nor are part of a conservation program, and that most conservation programs zoos do pursue do not involve successful reintroduction programs (Jamieson, 1995). On this point, critical zoo professionals argue that claims by contemporary zoos of being conservation centers do not withstand scrutiny (Hancocks, 2001). A recent study for the World Conservation Union's Species Survival Commission found globally only 145 documented projects of captive animal reintroduction to the wild in the past century (59% involved zoo animals), and of these projects only 16 (11%) were successful in contributing to the establishment of a self-sustaining wild population (Beck, 1995). The zoo's focus on captive animal-based conservation efforts, in fact, sustains zoos as industries far more than it sustains wild animals, and may serve to funnel well-meaning but limited public conservation concern away from reversing the ongoing rapid destruction of wild animals and their habitats. While zoo visitors may be comforted to believe the local zoo is saving the world's endangered species, this can create a dangerous sense of complacency (Hancocks, 2001).

Conservation discourse has expanded and branched in the past century in dialogue with global environmental movements and discourses, putting less emphasis on controlling and managing animals and habitats and more emphasis on the interrelations of humans, animals, and nature. Yet, conventional conservationism is still often considerably anthropocentric when compared to more ecocentric-informed approaches to the environment. Implicit in much conservation work are mastery, othering, and exploitation themes, such as the idea that species are to be maintained and conserved often for human use (Wilson, 1984), whether that use is direct (as in nature as resource) or indirect (such as maintaining biodiversity and wildlife heritage for future human generations' enjoyment and well being). This sentiment is exemplified in a sign in Ohio's Columbus Zoo that features the following quote by Gifford Pinchot: "Conservation means the wise use of the earth and its resources for the lasting gain of man" (Donahue & Trump, 2006, p. 58).

The prevalence of conservationist ideology guides symbolic-material practice in zoos. In terms of education, while millions visit zoos each year, studies have shown that few leave the zoo with significantly better understandings of wildlife or more willingness to make changes for wildlife—notably, some studies have shown that visitors who viewed animals in highly artificial cages left the zoo with more negative attitudes toward and greater feelings of dominion over the animals (e.g., Kellert & Dunlap, 1989). Other studies have indicated that zoo visitors are much less knowledgeable about animals than backpackers, hunters, fishermen, and others

who claim an interest in animals; that zoo visitors express the usual prejudices about animals with 73% saying they dislike rattlesnakes and 52% vultures; that a high level of dissatisfaction in young, scientifically minded zoo employees stems from an almost complete indifference of the public to the zoo's educational efforts; that visitors tend to move quickly past cages, typically only stopping to watch baby animals or begging, feeding, or sound-making behaviors; and that visitors described animals most commonly using the terms "cute," "funny-looking," "lazy," "dirty," "weird," and "strange" (Jamieson, 1985).

The conventional discourse of conservation may be explained as not only failing to resist, but also in fact often accommodating dominant mastery, othering, and exploitation themed material-symbolic discourses of anthropocentrism, management, efficiency, commodification, etc. A recent material manifestation is exemplified in a media exposé on accredited zoos selling their animals to merchants, auctions, hunting ranches, individuals, unaccredited zoos, game farms, and trophy collectors—38% of the 19,361 mammals that left accredited American zoos between 1992 and mid-1998 went to these recipients (Baratay & Hardouin-Fugier, 2002). This exposé, in part, illustrates the exploitation-idealism dialectic embedded in zoo practice: Conservationism views the sacrifice of the freedom of individual animals in zoos, or the *exploitation* of individual animals, as necessary for the *ideal* sake of preserving populations. Whether or not one agrees this view is tenable, the sale of these animals further exhibits how such a view can ideologically inform actions that treat zoo animals as commodities.

Some critical zoo professionals argue that zoos, in fact, should not be accepted as they currently exist (Hancocks, 2001). In terms of conservation, zoos are not the best places for saving endangered species from extinction—better places would keep animals away from people, in sufficient numbers, and on large pieces of land, providing conditions that would be conducive to eventual release or ideally keeping endangered animals in their natural habitats from the start. While some critics recommend zoos themselves should become extinct, ending zoos may miss an important opportunity to transform zoos and their reflection and production of nature-human relations. Instead of abolishing zoos, renowned leading zoo architect and director Hancocks argues that we should fundamentally reinvent them.

In some leading accredited zoos, aspects of this reinvention are underway. Hancocks, for instance, has been at the center of transforming Western zoo design to leave behind exploitive presentations of animals in small concrete, metal-barred cages. Many zoos have now cast themselves as quasi-natural by replacing viewing area bars with glass, and concrete with fabricated slices of simulated habitats. Whereas the changes to exhibits may have some impact on the animals' health and state of mind, the zoo's changes are often as much, or more, for human visitors.⁴ The changes in exhibition resituate visitors to provide simulated windows into the animals' wild-like, natural-like habitats (Bostock, 1993). These windows are intended both to ameliorate some visitors' dissonance over seeing the animals in captivity and to stimulate respect and admiration rather than pity, superiority, or displays of mocking cruelty (Hancocks, 2001).

Whereas traditional zoos underscore an extreme marginalization of humans from nature by turning animals into spectacles, the new zoo actively tries to override this often disappointing perception by showing animals in more natural-looking environments, where they often appear to have privacy, autonomy, and the ability to avoid the human gaze (Davis, 1996). The shifting aesthetic of the new zoo does not necessarily strive to reverse the long separation of humans and nature, but instead attempts to frame nature as less dominated, less captive.

Zoo as Discursive Site: Gaze and Power

Of course, the zoo is not only shaped by discourse but, as a symbolic-material cultural site, the zoo also serves to shape discourse. In examining the zoo's current ideological and structural transformation, Beardsworth and Bryman (2001) trace the genealogy of today's zoos to their predecessors formed during the early stages of hierarchically organized, agriculture-based civilizations, starting with sacred menageries like those in Egypt, then early colonialism-era exclusive royal collections like those in Europe, followed by zoological gardens open to the public starting in the early 1800s. Zoos from historical times through today have carried two fundamental underlying themes: gaze and power.

The exhibition of animals, the central function of zoos, is a process of power wherein "almost total control is exercised by humans over animals' movements and activities, with minimal opportunity for the animal to exercise its own preferences and priorities" (p. 88). In such contexts, the zoo visitor gaze, with its similarities to Foucault's concept of panoptic surveillance, is inextricably linked to power, leaving the powerless at all times subject to the gaze of the powerful, "subject (irrespective of their own preferences) to constant scrutiny, monitoring and examination" (p. 88). Foucault (1975/1995) briefly explores connections of the Panopticon to one of the first menageries (Le Vaux's in Versailles) in which the king looked into seven cages radiating outward from his royal salon that held different species of animals, individualizing observation via species characterization and classification and the arrangement of space. Foucault argued the Panopticon, when applied purely to human society, in fact "is a royal menagerie; the animal is replaced by man, individual distribution by specific grouping and the king by the machinery of a furtive power" (p. 203).

Though the intention of some zoo visitors may be to engage in subject-to-subject encounters with animals, the zoo animal is always captive object to the human subjective gaze. The gaze is one-way, subject to object, allowing only for a one-way subject-subjective vision (Kaplan, 1997). The basic fact that the human is always free to leave and the animal is always confined marks a fundamental difference between the human visitor and the zoo animal (Jamieson, 1985). This arrangement also serves to protect the subject—the visitor sees the animals, gains pleasure, knowledge, power, and entertainment from them, but in a real sense remains protected from feelings and realities of vulnerability via the animals' captive state, and devoid of reciprocal

influence, just as the prisoners, not the guard, in the Panopticon are the ones being constituted by the power of the gaze.⁵

Berger (1980/1991) argues that zoo animals essentially disappear as they are incapable in the subordinated setting of their exhibits of equally reciprocating the visitor's gaze. In their surveilled captivity, the vast majority of zoo animals have been immunized from engaging in actual encounters with visitors. The zoological gaze both reproduces and is constituted by the mastery, othering, and exploitation poles of the human–nature dialectics and its dominance hinges upon the denial or exclusion of competing possibilities of gaze that might be rooted in harmony, connection, or idealism themes. Similar to the male gaze explored in feminist film theory that determines its object by projecting onto the female figure that is styled accordingly (Kaplan, 1997), the human zoological gaze determines its animal object and projects expectations and desires onto the animal who is quite literally, through captivity, presentation, and cage design, styled accordingly.

At the same time, the new zoo often references parallel discourses of domination. Morbello (1996) draws attention to the juxtaposition of zoo animals with the cultural trappings of exoticized humans with whom the animals would live in regional proximity in their natural habitats. The presence of simulated artifacts representing these culturally marked humans, which extend from fabricated ethnic human settings juxtaposed with habitat-simulating cages to zoo store ethnic craft souvenirs juxtaposed with toy animals, seems natural to visitors because the histories of the symbolic uses of animals and exotic “others” coincide (Desmond, 1999). Much like private and royal menagerie predecessors of contemporary zoos served to symbolize the vast extent of the dominion of the colonizers; the 1915–1916 World's Fair in San Diego, predecessor to San Diego Zoo, featured controlled environments displaying exotic animals and peoples. Ecofeminists, in particular, have explored the interconnections of colonialist, sexist, and “naturist” (Warren, 1997) domination. Plumwood (1993) argues “human domination of nature wears a garment cut from the same cloth as intra-human domination, but one which, like each of the others, has a specific form and shape of its own” (p. 13). As such, visitors to zoos “are exposed not only to a variety of animals from around the world, but to implicit lessons about power, ethnicity, race, gender, difference, and the self. In short, zoo animals teach us culture” (Morbello, 1996, p. 523).

Zoo West

Carbaugh (1996) asserts that researchers who undertake cultural explorations of human–nature relations should grapple with “highly particular, socially situated, symbolically constructed images in place” (p. 54). Such case studies enable comparative assessments of available means for conceiving of and evaluating nature, as well as exploration of local meaning systems and the attendant attitudes that these cultivate and constrain. In addition, such studies “should lead us to see our own taken-for-granted ways anew and to reflect upon them, freeing us from entangled webs we have helped weave” (pp. 54–55).

Observation at this project's case study—a major, leading urban zoo in the American West that I will call Zoo West—substantiates much of what scholars have critiqued about zoos in general. Prior critiques of cultural theming and conservation as updated forms of mastery, exploitation, and othering, however, are complicated by some of the well-meaning intentions behind the theming and conservation goals of the zoo, and the genuine efforts to make the zoo a site of connection—idealism—harmony by zoo staff within the constraints of the institution. In addition, new problems emerge, such as issues of exoticized cultural theming not only serving to further reinforce the zoological gaze but also to distance zoo visitors from their own connection to a particular ecosystem's conservation; of built “realistic” nature exhibits immersing zoo visitors in simulated animal habitats but masking signs of human encroachment and environmental exploitation; and of the lack of a coherent structural critique leaving intact, and largely unchallenged, the zoological gaze and the West's role in environmental destruction.

The following critiques are not intended to impugn the sincere and environmentally dedicated efforts of zoo personnel, but rather to reflect the inherent bind that institutions such as zoos find themselves in within contemporary culture. The subsequent sections relate ongoing debates about zoos and scholars' general critiques of zoo discourse to specific empirical data I gathered at Zoo West via interviews and participant observation, and add data-driven critiques to the scholarship. I explore which discourses are produced at the zoo, how they manifest, and how they inform and are informed by Western ideological mastery—harmony, othering—connection, and exploitation—idealism discursive human—nature dialectics. I also look at how zoo officials explain intentions behind some of these representations and, finally, what circulation and participation within these discourses may mean for visitors.

Exoticized Cultural Theming and Visitor Connection to Animals and Ecosystems on Display

The international cultural theming of contemporary zoos is in great evidence at Zoo West. The slogan featured on top of Zoo West's map, which visitors receive at the entrance, is: “See the world. Never leave the city.” Zoo West exhibits are organized around themed collections of animals, marked on the map as “African Savanna,” “Tropical Asia,” “Australasia,” “Tropical Rain Forest,” “Temperate Forest,” and “Northern Trail.” Some of the themed areas feature simulacra of human cultural sites. For example, the “African Savanna” that greets people at the zoo's main entrance includes a detailed simulation of an “African Village” that visitors can walk through and explore. The “Village” is eerily empty of people but filled with their intimate belongings—such as a playing transistor radio, clothing, and cooking utensils that visitors can examine and even touch without ever encountering the owners. Similarly, “Tropical Asia” includes a peopleless simulated traditional “Thai Village” next to the “Elephant Forest.” And on the “Northern Trail” on the way to the grizzly bear exhibit, visitors walk by a replica of a traditional First Nations salmon-drying rack draped with fabricated salmon.

Haraway (1991) argues that humans use other animals as a mirror that they metaphorically “polish” in order to look at themselves and contemporary society. Instead of seeing their own reflections, however, most Western visitors to the culturally themed zoo generally see reflected back the simulated cultural trappings of those people marked and exoticized as “other” by Western society. The othering–connection dialectic is deeply at play in this dynamic of the contemporary zoo. Zoo personnel explain Zoo West’s intention of connecting visitors via culturally themed design to the animals’ regional settings to encourage visitors to protect the complete ecosystem of interrelations that encompass the animals. However, the othering effect of exoticized cultural theming may instead turn the mirror of captive animals and the mirror of simulated exotic/primitive cultures toward each other, allowing visitors a degree of imperialistic invisibility that, in turn, strengthens the visitor’s unreturned zoological gaze. The strategic placement of windows and other architectural aspects of the animal exhibits further serves to erase obvious signs of human intrusion, such as other people and doors and locks, leaving the animal seemingly untouched by Western hands.

In many ways, the zoo’s peopleless cultural theming presents an analogy to the “ethnographic present,” in which early twentieth century Westerners artificially constructed an illusion of pre-European-contact exotic “purity” in their representations of indigenous people with the careful erasure of signs of modernity (see Edward Curtis’ photographs of First Nations people). As with contemporary zoo design, this approach to representation of the other was often meant to respect and protect the other’s way of life, but in the end, by masking their actual lived realities and plights in the face of Western encroachment, such salvaged representations may have done far more harm. Similarly, via exoticized cultural theming and erasing signs of human encroachment, the zoo may not only encourage forms of othering but also mask connections visitors would otherwise perceive between their own lives and the lives of zoo animals.

However, while Morbello’s (1996) key point is that zoos’ culturally themed animal and commodity displays are always associated with exoticized, othered people—never Westerners—this assertion does not hold true throughout Zoo West. The “Family Farm” exhibit, for instance, is themed on an old-fashioned North American farm and includes a kiosk with materials exhibiting the importance of shopping at local farmers’ markets. One could argue that the family farm is an exoticized representation of a largely extinct but newly reemerging approach to agriculture, offering an idealized rather than an exploitive large-scale agriculture view of Western human–nature relations, one in which harmony and connection are presented as ideals practiced today at the individualized level of buying from local farmers. Yet here again the simulacrum of a more sustainable relationship with nature is peopleless (and, during my multiple visits, also animal-less), leaving the visitor with a museum-like gaze upon the exhibit instead of an experience of a vital way of life.

Western cultural themes that provide a chance for self-reflection could have been engaged in the “Northern Trail” exhibit. Yet on the way to see the grizzly bears, instead of, say, a simulated Alaskan suburb with dumpsters the bears might visit for

dinner or a tourist plane banking low over the bears in their simulated stream, visitors encounter the fabricated traditional Native salmon-drying rack. Within the othering–connection dialectic, the drying rack represents an othered people viewed as having lived in a connected subsistence relationship with nature; however, in the tradition of the “ethnographic present,” the representation is distanced from both that people’s contemporary ways of life and from the majority of visitors’ experiences. As with the “Family Farm,” the “Northern Trail” intends to inspire connection in visitors by simulating a largely extinct, and again peopleless, way of life.

Cultural theming extends to animal naming practices at Zoo West. For instance, the Alaskan grizzlies are named Teniy and Deynali, borrowing from regional First Nations’ languages. Interestingly, these deliberate naming practices do not extend into the backstage workings of the zoo. The bears are called Bob and Steve by their keepers, who humorously assert that Bob and Steve, while not Native names, are certainly Alaskan names. Critically minded zoo staff reflect on the practice of naming the animals and whether the Native names achieve the intended goals of fostering both visitor respect for and connection with the animals. They ask questions such as: Does naming the animals make them seem more like pets and, if so, is this less dignified? In addition, do Native names inherently give the animals dignity?

Exoticized and peopleless cultural theming can easily translate into the commodification of both culture and zoo animal. Morbello (1996) argues that zoo gift shops seamlessly transform the “gaze of zoo visitor into gaze of shopper.” The Zoo West store’s station at the main entrance/exit makes it the obvious last stop for most visitors. Above the shop’s display windows of stuffed toy animals and exotic ethnic handicrafts wave a row of 20 nation state flags. No American, Canadian, or western European flags are present. While the argument might be made that the flags only represent those countries with animals on display, and this in itself is poignant in regard to the above critique, many animals on display at Zoo West are Western. Here, too, the flags reproduce notions of the exotic other, and consumption of the other, while leaving the Western visitor’s role in the relationship unrepresented and obscured, at the same time, directly capitalizing off zoo visitors’ dialectic poles of idealism, connection, and harmony when applied to the wider, international community.

Built “Realistic” Nature and Conservation Messages

While the zoo attempts to transport Western visitors to faraway lands via the exotic locations suggested in many exhibits’ theming, like other leading contemporary zoos Zoo West also attempts to deliver visitors conservation messages via exhibit design and texts. These conservation messages can be in conflict with visual, spatial, and design messages of the exhibits and these conflicts reveal tensions within the exploitation–idealism, mastery–harmony, and othering–connection dialectics.

Such a conflict is evident in the juxtaposition of a large conservation message educational sign with the “African Savanna.” To reach the “African Savanna,” most visitors pass the sign’s ominous mechanical ticking up of the expanding number of

human population on Earth and ticking down of animal habitat as it is lost to human encroachment. Just a few meters away, visitors enter the “African Savanna” where they can see abundant giraffes and other savanna animals roaming outside the walls of a one-room African primary school. This representation presents an Africa where rising populations have had benign, if any, effect, and where people live in small, self-sustaining villages in close, harmonious proximity to abundant wildlife. Within the exploitation–idealism dialectic, this idealized and immersive rendition of reality serves to mask or, at a minimum, obscure the costs of exploitation inherent in both global overpopulation and habitat encroachment communicated by the strong conservation message of the nearby sign.

Conservation messages also in many ways conflict with overall approaches to visual, spatial, and design messages of the zoo’s built environment. Zoo West is one of a select few zoos that pioneered the most recent wave of plunging visitors into nature-like exhibits, setting a standard for zoos all over the world and boasting more exhibit awards than most American zoos. Before changes began in the mid-1970s, animals were grouped by species—bears, cats, monkeys—and exhibited without context to provide visitors the best “postage stamp” views. In contrast, the zoo’s contemporary approach appears at first to favor the connection pole of the othering–connection dialectic, often immersing visitors in simulated landscapes with living flora that approximate the habitats of animals. Most of the big draw animals, such as the gorillas, the jaguar, and the elephants, inhabit exhibits that artificially resemble their wild landscapes and these landscapes extend into the visitor areas.

While these contemporary exhibits emphasize personal connection to the animals and their habitats, most are designed so visitors do not see or connect with other humans when looking at the animals—viewing areas are angled so as to have visitors never face, and therefore never view, one another across an exhibit. One zoo staff member explained the intention of the naturalistic design is to encourage visitors to feel as if they have seen representations of animals and their natural habitats in the wild and, as a result, to feel like protecting the animals’ complete ecosystem. According to zoo documents, the exhibits are intended to elevate the role of zoo animals from mere spectacles to respected ambassadors of their wild counterparts. In this way, Zoo West is described as taking part in a wider “evolution of zoos” by creating exhibits touted as healthier for the animals, as punctuating the critical relationship between animals and their habitat, and as giving visitors a more accurate snapshot of animals’ lives in the wild.

While these intentions and aspirations are noble and may have some health benefits for the animals, the sophisticated naturalistic design also serves to mask the artificiality of the zoo experience and the extractive predicates to the very existence of the zoo. One staff member explained that the design camouflages other humans and familiar signs of human, making it so visitors “won’t see doors for keepers or drain holes—you won’t see reminders of people. The ideal is that you could imagine you are in that landscape.” In simulating an experience where one can imagine oneself in a landscape with wild animals and free of other humans, naturalistic design emphasizes a sublime connection over a connection to human impact. Such design presents

another analogy to the salvaged “purity” of the “ethnographic present”—here, other humans are removed from view leaving one’s subject-to-object zoological gaze intact and uninterrupted by the returning, and quite possibly reflective, gaze of other humans.

Zoo personnel also work within the tensions of the exploitation–idealism dialectic—they want to educate about environmental and habitat destruction to raise visitor concern and they also want to simulate an immersive experience to allow for wonder. Creating an immersive naturalistic experience while making more obvious the encroachment of humans and the captivity of the animals within the necessitated artificiality of the environs might better serve these two goals. Exhibits that position visitors to see both the animals and one another and to see built representations or actual views of human encroachment would provide tangible reminders of escalating human populations of which the animals, both captive and free, are constantly made aware.

Zoo West has also been a leader in the trend to update exhibits so visitors are not physically situated to look downward at animals. Informed by and informing the mastery–harmony dialectic, zoo designers have replaced older moat or barred cages with formats that put visitors on equal or lower viewing levels, often looking through glass or over no immediately obvious barrier. In one newer exhibit of a golden orb spider, Zoo West experiments with no barrier; a sign draws attention to the lack of separation between visitor and animal: “Cool, no glass!” The zoo’s intentions behind these changes are precisely to reduce elements of the visitor’s dominant zoological gaze, though, as one staff member remarked, to date no empirical evidence illustrates the effects of these vantage changes.

A Lack of Structural Critique

Harvey (1993) argues that the final victory of modernity and capitalism is the artificial reconstruction and superficial preservation of the natural world, and hence the possible masking of its actual demise. One could argue that in its material–symbolic representations of nature, the zoo provides a microcosm of this artificial reconstruction and superficial preservation, one that fails to fully articulate or critique global political–economic structures of environmental exploitation. To ground and problematize Harvey’s argument within Zoo West and the exploitation–idealism dialectic we can look to the “Tropical Rain Forest” exhibit, an immersive sensory-rich artificial reconstruction of the natural world.

In the “Tropical Rain Forest,” visitors encounter an idealized simulated healthy rainforest with abundant flora and fauna; they breathe in rich steamy air, feel the mist gather on their skin, hear tropical birds call to one another and see them fly overhead. Visitors, however, do not encounter simulations of bulldozers destroying the rainforest to make way for large-scale agriculture or grazing land, simulations that would provide a visceral reminder that these pristine ecosystems are daily being destroyed. Instead, the visitor’s visceral experience is limited to a constructed rainforest that is, indeed, immaculately preserved.

A kiosk nearby the exhibit exit, however, attempts to reference the ravages of global exploitation upon rainforests and to engage visitors who stop to read. Four panels with images and text are displayed. One panel asks in large letters: "What's Causing the Disappearance of Tropical Rainforests?" The answers the panel gives illuminate political-economic structures of exploitation, but are admittedly partial. The first statement, in large letters, is: "The causes of rainforest destruction are numerous and complex. Below is a partial list with simplified examples." The simplified examples are broken into two categories, "population pressures" and "desire for short-term economic profits." Under "population pressures" are: "large-scale, nontraditional slash-and-burn agriculture, excessive wood-cutting for firewood and charcoal," and "forced resettlement." Listed under "desire for short-term economic profits" are: "massive clear-cutting for log exports with non-sustainable forestry practices" and "cattle ranching, particularly in South and Central America."

Images include a drawing of a forest burning with a handful of indigenous cows waiting at the edge to graze. No people, including those who started the forest fire or those who ordered the burning, are pictured on this sign about causes, and no multinational corporate interest is mentioned. In fact, no specific human agents are identified in the text. These exclusions of named agents obscure the source of the problem and the exclusion of global linkages serve to mask the Western visitors' own structural investment in this destructive exploitation process, giving weight to the othering pole of the othering-connection dialectic.

However, two of the panels ask, "What can you do to help save tropical rainforests?" and "What's Working?" On the "What can you do" panel, an emphasis is put on the connection pole, with a drawing of a store filled with "exotic imports" made of rainforest woods pictured with the small words "think globally, act locally" beneath it. Listed in a column are things visitors can do, such as "ask before you buy," "reduce, reuse, recycle," "support conservation organizations," "support organizations working for cultural survival and diversity," and "help increase public awareness." Information is included about benefits of shade-grown coffee agriculture with a notice that visitors can buy such coffee at the zoo café. On the "What's Working?" panel, the othering pole is emphasized with named efforts limited to the rainforest-area itself, including family planning, non-destructive local agriculture and harvesting, governments lowering foreign debt payments by agreeing to protect certain tropical forests, wildlife sanctuary partnerships, and ecotourism. Posted in stand-out white on these panels is an announcement drawing attention to the kiosk's inclusion in the "Boeing Tropical Rain Forest Exhibit" and a sponsorship list with Boeing Company in large letters and other individual and organizational donors in smaller letters as givers of "generous gifts" to the exhibit with the goal of "encouraging appreciation and conservation of tropical rain forests."

The suggestions of things visitors might do is an excellent start to showing visitors they have a role to play and that role may somehow connect to their consumption and interrelate with global political-economic processes. However, the display stops short of clearly explaining the embedded complexity of structural issues that visitors could, if informed, work to oppose, or of clearly linking causes, what's working, and

what visitors can do to the destructive agency of large-scale, transnational political economic processes and specific actors that visitors, if informed, could lobby, boycott, or attempt to transform in partnerships with local rainforest communities. The educational limitations of educational panels when contrasted with the sensory, immersive experience of the artificial reconstruction and superficial preservation of the rainforest are many; however, corporate sponsorship of the exhibit, and leading zoos' continued effort to attract more large-scale corporate sponsorship, also help ensure visitors are given a "partial" and "simplified" view of the causes behind deforestation. In this sponsor-pleasing paradigm, visitors are told to think and work on individual and local scales with a focus on conservation and culture, but are not given tools rooted in the idealism pole of the exploitation–idealism dialectic to collectively resist or advocate for large-scale structural and systemic alternatives.

Visitors' own local forestry practices also remain unchallenged by a focus on forest destruction in faraway exotic places instead of in their own ecosystems, in which they play a more direct and relatable role. Such an approach is not limited to Zoo West. Within this othering–connection dialectic, Hancocks (1995) argues that zoo visitors in the American Pacific Northwest, for instance, are "told much more about the loss of tropical rain forests than they are about clear-cutting of the forests of the Pacific Northwest, even though the rate of depletion of our temperate forests is equal to or greater than anything happening in these conveniently distant tropics" (p. 36). Whereas the plight of distant rainforests is far removed from visitors' daily lives and easily elicits sympathy, attention to local wildlife issues to which visitors may feel more direct connection "might cause some uneasiness by requiring paying visitors to question the consequences of their own life-styles" (p. 36).

Zoo Discourse Shortcomings

Zoo West's map and web site feature the slogan "helping to create a sustainable future for wildlife" and the mission statement "The zoo is a conservation and education institution demonstrating the value, beauty and interdependence of all living things." Within the framework of the zoo's existing symbolic–material discourse, does Zoo West meet these aims? The zoo is one of a handful in the USA that employs a research staff in part to ascertain whether it is successful in reaching its institutional goals with visitors. In staff-distributed and analyzed exit surveys, Zoo West visitors say that while they understand an environmental problem exists, the zoo has not given them a personal way to make a connection. Visitors are able to articulate conservation messages in broad terms when they leave, but they are left confused about how they can make a difference. For example, as one zoo staff member explained, visitors wonder whether recycling will "lead to helping save tigers."

This lack of a personal connection to or understanding of how one can make a difference may be related to the prominence and persistence of the othering pole of the othering–connection dialectic at the zoo—seen, in part, in the discursive distancing of animals and their simulated habitats from visitors' own familiar, unmarked, and unexoticized cultures, homes, and collective impact. This lack of

connection may also relate to the zoo's institutional and discursive failure to meaningfully budge visitors from the mastery to the harmony pole of the mastery–harmony dialectic by effectively shifting the zoological gaze to a very different subject-to-subject encounter. Visitor inability to understand how to act upon the zoo's conservation messages may also relate to the absence of a clear and comprehensive story about the interrelated structural causes of environmental exploitation in which visitors take part by virtue of overconsumption or social or political inaction and, on the idealism pole of the exploitation–idealism dialectic, the lack of a clear direction to enact systemic change.

Notwithstanding substantial and good faith efforts by the zoo to represent a resistant discourse and champion endangered animals and ecosystems, the prevalent discourses of othering, mastery, and exploitation remain evident in exotic cultural theming and in the power visitors hold in their zoological gaze. Beyond masking structural problems, idealized representations of cultures untouched by exploitive globalization and of pristine nature settings untouched by humans, combined with the failure to make clear and coherent linkages among visitors, agents of environmental destruction, and the conditions of global extractive practices, serve to reproduce dominant mastery, othering, and exploitation discourses about animals and nature. Even where the themes of harmony, connection, and idealism may dialogically resist these dominant discourses, they fail to invite clear and tangible transformation.

Discussion

Whereas many leading zoos strive to move away from the notion of the menagerie, the majority of animals collected and displayed within even highly conservation-minded zoos such as Zoo West are neither endangered nor threatened—among Zoo West's 300 species, only 10 percent are endangered or threatened. In the case of those animals neither threatened nor endangered, conservationist purposes for keeping them are not entirely clear. Some argue that it is important for humans who have lost touch with nature to have an opportunity to connect; that the contemporary physical separation of most urban people from non-urban nature makes it easier to forget about living in harmony and connection in more ideal conditions with nature; that such human–nature separation allows humans to dwell comfortably within othering, mastery, and exploitation discourses, taking part directly or indirectly in extraction and destruction.

But does being in the physical presence of captive wild animals at the zoo help to shift people to creative spaces of imagining and even manifesting more ideal, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial nature–human relations? If attitudes, in fact, are changed at the zoo, are they not in part influenced and shaped by the discourse that comes through the othering of exoticized cultural theming, the mastery of the zoological gaze, and the exploitation of captivity? Within these and other material–symbolic constraints, it may not be possible for the zoo visitor, who, according to zoo researchers, spends an average of five seconds at a zoo animal exhibit, to deeply

encounter other animals and themselves in ways that influence perceptions or behaviors, or help visitors grapple with or transform the structural eco-social forces in which they play a part. In the end, it is indeed questionable whether the possible payoffs of a three-hour zoo visit outweigh the coercion that keeps animals in captivity for empty, monotonous lifetimes.

Zoos as Paradoxical Institutions

Many people talk about a discomfort they feel when they visit a zoo. Some go to the zoo to expose children to animals and nature, and, while many enjoy the experience themselves, others remain conflicted about going. Other people refuse to go even to the most conservation-minded zoos. Yet there are no sit-ins and few to no protests at zoos. The dialectical tensions at play within contemporary zoos make them slippery targets for social change—while mastery—othering—exploitation themes reign, harmony—connection—idealism counterthemes are also present and serve to complicate matters. Conway (1995), a well-respected leading US zoo professional, states the paradox of contemporary zoos simply: zoos aim to “inspire public interest in wild creatures and nature, to provide ecological education, and to help save wild species from extinction, but in doing so they confine wild animals away from nature and manage their lives” (p. 2).

Zoos are also a part of a consumer system. Even if some are fully governmental agencies, under conditions of neoliberalism, zoos are required to “pay their own way.” This means, no matter how well intentioned zoo staffers may be, inevitably zoos are subject to pressures to increase visitor numbers and attract corporate sponsors. As such, material and symbolic choices do not exist in conservation-minded vacuums. Zoos avoid particularly uncomfortable critiques and exhibit non-endangered animals precisely to be crowd-pleasing. Under these material conditions, well-meaning zoo personnel are working within structural limitations that often preclude alternate discourses.

Are zoos part of the solution or part of the problem? Perhaps they are both. Zoos like Zoo West can leave some visitors with a general feeling of discomfort but they can also leave visitors with very important messages. The messages, notwithstanding the dominant mastery—othering—exploitation themes, suggest zoos can be, and in some ways are, a possible source of resistance and disruption. For visitors who simply enjoy being at the zoo, the conservation messages may be some of the first to which they are exposed. For others, the mere fact that their zoological gaze is disturbed by possibly sensing the subject in the very real presence of animals in captivity may spark transformative perceptions toward the nature—human relationship. For instance, Malamud (1998) notes that almost all stories involving zoos in literature condemn zoos as places of cruelty and deadened sensibility, indicating that literary authors, some of the most sensitive cultural producers of society, react to their own zoo experiences in culturally resistant ways.

This paradoxical understanding of zoos suggests directions for change in research and practice. While the best zoos today are dialogic, in which all poles of

the mastery–harmony, othering–connection, and exploitation–idealism dialectics are heard in tension with one another, studies such as this one can illuminate deeper conceptualizations of how such tensions may stand in the way of mutually beneficial human–nature relations. Such research can support zoo efforts to serve as organized forms of resistance to wide-scale environmentally destructive practices by pointing to ways symbolic–material discourses help or hinder these efforts.

One major obstacle to zoos being sites for connection and action is that zoos fail to clearly identify an adversary. “Without an adversarial component, the potential target of collective action is likely to remain an abstraction—hunger, disease, poverty, or war, for example. Collective action requires a consciousness of human agents whose policies or practices must be changed and a ‘we’ who will help to bring about change” (Gamson, 1988, p. 92). When it comes to the destruction of nature, who is the enemy? One can point to local and global processes that exploit nature. More specifically, one can point to specific local developments, transnational institutions or corporations, or imperialist governmental policies that coerce people out of former, often more cooperative relations with nature and into relationships of exploitation. One can also point to the vast majority of Westerners, who both directly and indirectly destroy and disproportionately consume nature at a higher and higher rate each year. Zoos can strive to communicate these “adversarial components” far more clearly. Gamson argues “to sustain collective action, the targets identified by the frame must successfully bridge the abstract and the concrete” (p. 92). Whereas the zoo is making honest attempts to build this bridge, its attempts are fragmented and the enemy and the “we” remain diffuse.

A focus on specific actors connected to specific problems and solutions could help. For instance, instead of a “Family Farm” exhibit, which represents a virtually extinct method of traditional Western farming, zoos could have a display on environmental destruction and animal cruelty caused by the predominant Western large-scale agri-industrial farm. To experientially illustrate the “we” who will help to bring about change, the zoo could feature an immersive working model of a contemporary local, sustainable, community-supported organic farm that visitors could volunteer in or buy directly from during their visit. Resistance discourse effectively coming through the site of the zoo can be amplified.

Zoo as Site of Resistance

For all the talk from zoos about conservation and education, the zoo is still a place to go for entertainment, lighthearted fun, and good times, a place that reinforces and does little to disturb the zoological gaze. I will venture that zoos truly dedicated to improving animals’ lots and human environmental understandings cannot fully become sites of meaningful resistance while aligning with this model of entertainment, while perpetuating the cruelty inherent in control and captivity, and while reproducing the other-subordinating, other-erasing zoological gaze. Nor can zoos achieve such goals while continuing to harbor the large-scale institutional costs

associated with extensive exhibit infrastructure and to be beholden to pressures to be crowd and sponsor pleasing.

I offer two preliminary suggestions emerging out of my present analysis for alternate possibilities for new kinds of zoos, what one might call non-zoos. These non-zoo models are intended to provide heuristic examples and fuel discussion about ways that alternate models could serve as centers of resistance and leaders in symbolic–material change in the human–nature relationship. These non-zoos would function to introduce alternative possibilities to the gaze, from one that is dominant and objectifying to one that is witnessing and rehabilitating, and to shift the weight of the dialectical poles from mastery, othering, and exploitation themes to harmony, connection, and idealism counterthemes. In turn, these suggested models would shift zoo symbolic–material production from the more anthropocentric discourse of conservation to the more mutual and ecocentric discourse of restoration.

One non-zoo prototype would be based on contemporary wildlife rescue models. These spaces would only house animals who could not survive in their wild habitats, providing injured or orphaned animals with a place to recuperate and rehabilitate. Injuries and orphaning caused directly or indirectly by humans would be potent tools to educate visitors about human encroachment, emphasizing the connection pole of the othering–connection dialectic. Visitors would witness volunteers or volunteer themselves in the rehabilitation and care of these animals, learning interdependency, vulnerability, and an ethic of care, and emphasizing the harmony pole of the mastery–harmony dialectic. The ultimate aim for these animals would be, when ready, reintroduction into safe, wild habitats. This type of approach would also frame visitors' experience very differently within the exploitation–idealism dialectic, providing an experiential education about the creative and compassionate possibilities within personal and ecological interconnectedness, and greatly deemphasizing entertainment at other animals' expense. This model would effectively shift the zoological gaze to a reciprocal, subject-to-subject encounter, and would connect visitors to the protection and rehabilitation of ecosystems, as they would be invested in healthy habitats being intact for the animals' reentry.

Another non-zoo prototype would claim its space on the internet, using live streaming video of wild animals in their natural ecosystems.⁶ This non-zoo would serve the purposes of directly helping to protect, providing constant collective surveillance of animal habitats and possible human encroachment, as well as educating visitors via actual experiences of wild animals and their interdependencies with their ecosystems, emphasizing the connection, idealism, and harmony poles of the dialectics. This zoo would ultimately cost less to run, be less reliant on profit motive, and cause considerably less environmental disruption. What would be missing would be the live presence of animals. As we have seen, however, even in the conventional contemporary zoo, animal presence is highly mediated and human senses are generally separated from those of zoo animals by thick glass windows or moats—barriers that share similarities to those of the space crossed by cyber technology and displayed on a video screen. What might be lost in not having the other animal physically present could be greatly outweighed by the gains experienced

in observing wild animals leading lives in which they have agency in their habitats.⁷ In addition, the fundamental coercive mastery, exploitation, and othering problems inherent in zoo captivity and the direct and numbing gaze of endless live human visitors would be replaced by the watchful eyes of an expanded visitor base that would provide protective witness, involving visitors in a far more reciprocal experience of care and mutuality. The popularity of nature and animal documentary programs helps illustrate how this type of non-zoo might be especially successful, specifically when viewers additionally experience forms of agency in directly protecting the animals featured.

Each of these non-zoos would feature designs and interactive educational texts and images that directly connect visitors to the animals and to visitors' own roles in larger eco-social systemic processes that affect the animals. Instead of zoo design that clusters culturally marked humans and animals into exoticized faraway themes, both non-zoo models would emphasize the connection pole of the othering–connection dialectic by depicting lived experience of habitat. In addition, zoo maps could contrast how animals who thrived in local or global spaces before human encroachment now attempt to traverse and inhabit these spaces in such contemporary settings as suburban sprawl, highway systems, and lumbered or mass agriculture land bereft of biodiversity. Likewise, material and virtual educational kiosks could bring problems home by explicitly linking animal injury or habitat destruction to individual, commercial, or political agents and linking these agents to local and global political economic practices, clearly illuminating the problem within a larger system and clearly identifying visitors' relationships within that system. Design and educational efforts would emphasize the idealism countertheme of the exploitation–idealism dialectic, highlighting clear avenues for personal and systemic change and laying out unambiguous steps for community and political scale advocacy.

Stuart Hall has commented that “the gaze that obliterates involves a desire which is refused” (Kaplan, 1997). The desire for meaningful and mutual human–nature encounters that propels many people to today's zoo is largely refused by the other-obliterating gaze of the contemporary zoo. When the zoological gaze is removed and replaced by a reciprocal or witnessing relationship constituted in harmony–connection–idealism discourses, the widely shared human desire to meaningfully connect with nature may be experienced. Consequently, other animals may benefit, as well.

In some ways, these non-zoo proposals allow humans to encounter animals and nature while also turning the gaze upon ourselves, providing far more accurate mirrors than the zoos of today. As with the critical turn toward whiteness studies, in which white people and men follow the lead of people of color and women to study their oppressive positions of privilege (Kaplan, 1997), alternative approaches to zoos may provide opportunities for Western society to self-examine and move beyond human–nature relations of subject–object to relations of mindful and meaningful mutuality. The zoo will likely always involve some element of looking. However, if looking is power, that power can also be transformed to a non-dominating, non-objectifying power dedicated to witnessing interdependency and rehabilitating

reciprocity; to resisting and overcoming the dominating poles of the three environmental dialectics, mastery, othering, and exploitation; and to invigorating highly tangible practices of harmony, connection, and idealism.

Notes

- [1] An earlier version of this essay received First Place Top Competitive Paper in the Environmental Communication Division at the 2006 National Communication Association conference in San Antonio, TX. The first part of the title is borrowed from the song “At the Zoo” written by Paul Simon and recorded by Simon and Garfunkel on their 1968 Album *Bookends*. The lyrics provide a popular example of discursive production in the zoo setting of animals and nature–human relations. An excerpt: “Somethin’ tells me it’s all happening at the zoo. I do believe it, I do believe it’s true. The monkeys stand for honesty, giraffes are insincere, and the elephants are kindly but they’re dumb. Orangutans are skeptical of changes in their cages, and the zookeeper is very fond of rum. Zebras are reactionaries, antelopes are missionaries, pigeons plot in secrecy, and hamsters turn on frequently. What a gas! You gotta come and see at the zoo.”
- [2] The discourse of interrelationship in the purely human realm had gained prominence during the US Civil Rights Movement, which in some ways may have helped establish a foundation for wider environmental ideological acceptance.
- [3] These projects comprised activities including more conventional zoo projects such as animal husbandry development, behavioral studies, and captive breeding, as well as activities such as reintroduction, rehabilitation, and habitat restoration. Projects took place in settings such as zoos, classrooms, and the wild (Association of Zoos and Aquariums, 2007).
- [4] Despite the changes to many leading zoos’ viewing areas, critical zoo professionals point out that most zoo animals spend a great part of each day and all night in barren concrete and steel cages (Hancocks, 2001). The conditions publicly criticized in the past few decades are still the norm, but are now merely out of sight—“the typical zoo remains more Alcatraz than Arcadia” (p. 142).
- [5] I want to express gratitude to one of my reviewers for further developing this notion, and encouraging me to explore it more fully within this article.
- [6] For a current example of a live streaming video effort see the BioDiversity Research Institute’s eagle webcam: www.briloon.org/watching-wildlife/eagle-cam.php. During nesting season, the webcam provides live footage from a camera 70-feet up a white pine tree on the coast of Maine. The camera is fixed on a nesting pair of bald eagles identified as the most successful breeding pair in the state, having nested at the site for 13 years and raised 20 offspring.
- [7] Critical zoo professionals who point to using such technology to replace captive animals note that viewers are mesmerized seeing animals in their habitats in real-time video (Hancocks, 2001).

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