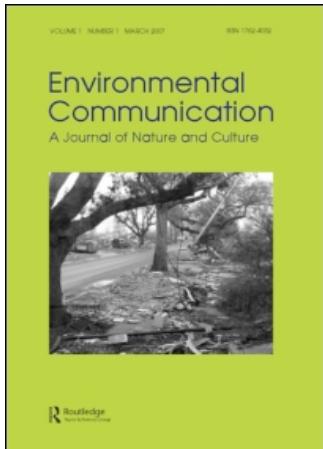


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### **Chewing on the Grizzly Man: Getting to the Meat of the Matter**

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# Chewing on the Grizzly Man: Getting to the Meat of the Matter

Julie Kalil Schutten

*At the Sundance Film Festival in 2005 director Werner Herzog released *Grizzly Man*. The film explores over 100 hours of video footage left by self-described eco-warrior Timothy Treadwell. Treadwell spent 13 summers living with grizzly bears at the Katmai National Park and Preserve on the Alaska Peninsula in an effort to protect the bears living there from human harm. I argue that the dissonance felt by viewers of the film surrounds a disconfirmation of human faith in the nature/culture binary. Treadwell's death is troubling because the predator/prey relationship makes humans "pieces of meat" and as such objects rather than subjects. This interruption forcibly moves humans to the nature side of the dualism, thereby questioning the superiority of the culture side of the binary. The potential for deconstructing the nature/culture binary through Treadwell's story, as well as the judgments against Treadwell that resist such deconstruction, has significant implications for the environmental movement insofar as the nature/culture binary is central to Western environmental ideologies and exploitations.*

**Keywords:** Timothy Treadwell; Nature/Culture Binary; Predator/Prey Relationship; Absent Referent/Meat; Environmental Ethics

'In nature, there are boundaries. One man spent the last 13 years of his life crossing them'

'The story of a life gone wild'

—Taglines from the film *Grizzly Man* (IMDB, n.d.)

At the Sundance Film Festival in 2005, director Werner Herzog released *Grizzly Man*. The film explores over 100 hours of video footage left by self-described eco-warrior Timothy Treadwell. Kirk Honeycutt (2005) of the *Hollywood Reporter* writes: "It's one

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of the best nature films ever made, a brilliant and poetic portrait of a haunted yet happy man mired in controversy and a provocative meditation on the Walden ideal and man's romance with the myth of nature and its innocence" (¶ 1). *Grizzly Man* received 12 awards, including the Los Angeles Film Critics Association Award for Best Documentary/Non-fiction Film and the Sundance Film Festival's Alfred P. Sloan Feature Film Prize (IMDB, n.d.).

In addition to receiving acclaim from the film industry, *Grizzly Man* received wide exposure, airing repeatedly on the Discovery Channel and Animal Planet. The film also prompted many commentaries both praising and despising Treadwell on YouTube as well as innumerable blog sites. Manohla Dargis (2005) of *The New York Times* writes:

It is a rare documentary like 'Grizzly Man,' which has beauty and passion often lacking in any type of film, that makes you want to grab its maker and head off to the nearest bar to discuss man's domination of nature and how Disney's cute critters reflect our profound alienation from the natural order. (¶ 3)

Treadwell's death started a conversation that challenged the ideology of humans as separate from "wild nature." Herzog's film functioned to propel this conversation further into the mainstream.

Timothy Treadwell spent 13 summers living with grizzly bears at the Katmai National Park and Preserve on the Alaska Peninsula in an effort to protect the bears living there from human harm. In 1997, Treadwell wrote the book *Among Grizzlies: Living with Wild Bears in Alaska*, and became a celebrity environmentalist who appeared on shows such as the *Late Show with David Letterman* (Bear Advocate, 2004). Treadwell also founded a grassroots organization called Grizzly People dedicated to "preserving bears and their wilderness habitat" (Grizzly People, n.d.). Many wildlife experts and others objected to Treadwell's anthropomorphizing the bears and habituating them to humans by living in close proximity. On October 6, 2003, Treadwell and his girlfriend, Amie Huguenard's remains were found having been chewed up by a 1,000 pound grizzly bear. At their campsite a video camera with the lens cap still on was found to have recorded six minutes of audio during the attack.

The manner of Treadwell and Huguenard's death is a strong point of controversy. Speaking just of Treadwell, many feel that although his death was tragic, "he got what he deserved" (Sam Egli as quoted in the film). Others like Willie Fulton, the pilot who found the bodies as the bear was eating a human rib cage, stated in the film that Treadwell "definitely lived on the edge. But he was a little smarter than everyone gave him credit for. He made it out here a long time before they caught up with him." As Fulton points out, Treadwell was on the edge—but the edge of what? Herzog's film makes clear, as illustrated by the taglines, that the edge or line crossed by Treadwell was the boundary between "wild nature" and "culture." As Herzog tells his audience:

I discovered a film of human ecstasies and darkest inner turmoil. As if there was a desire in him [Treadwell] to leave the confinements of his humanness and bond

with the bears. Treadwell reached out, seeking a primordial encounter. But in doing so, he crossed an invisible line.

Following Herzog's narration, if you try to leave the "confinements of your humanness" you must be experiencing "inner turmoil." Because of Treadwell's eccentric and bizarre character, many seem to assume he was lacking something, that there must have been some void for him as a human being. Searching for the name "Timothy Treadwell" on the Internet reveals many different types of web pages and YouTube testimonials where people indicate that they believed Treadwell was mentally ill or crazy. Furthermore, many reactions indicate a morbid obsession with his death, specifically the audiotape of the killing, which is not publicly accessible.

I argue that the dissonance felt by viewers of the film surrounds a disconfirmation of human faith in the nature/culture binary, and that Treadwell's death is troubling because the predator/prey relationship makes humans "pieces of meat" and, as such, objects rather than subjects. This interruption forcibly moves humans to the nature side of the dualism, thereby questioning the superiority of the culture side of the binary by exposing human vulnerability. Exploring Herzog's narration and the quest of Timothy Treadwell to protect bears illuminates the implications of tensions between nature (non-human animal) and culture (human) for social movements focused on environmental issues.

In what follows I first situate my study by briefly exploring the environmental literature highlighting the nature/culture dualism and nature as depicted in the popular media. I ground my discussion of the relationship between nature/culture by treating *Grizzly Man* as an example of nature films' potential ability to disseminate disruption of this binary. My method focuses on an examination of the central dualities in the film and their implications for environmental ethics. My primary analysis is of the film, but I also reference secondary texts to illustrate how the film was received. Analysis of the film highlights four themes: Treadwell's position as hero in the recovery narrative, narcissism and how this impedes opportunities for dialogue with "nature," the possibilities for dialogue as a result of Treadwell's choice to become vulnerable to the "dangers of nature," and the jarring audiences may experience by Treadwell's becoming meat. I conclude the essay by looking at *Grizzly Man* in relation to environmental ethics. Undergirding my analysis is the question of what the ethical principles of interconnectedness, mutual interdependence, and a "web of life" mentality look like when actually embraced. The potential for deconstructing the nature/culture binary through Treadwell's story, as well as the judgments against Treadwell that resist such deconstruction, has significant implications for the environmental movement insofar as the nature/culture binary is central to Western environmental ideologies and exploitations.

### The Omnipresent Line

The nature/culture line that Treadwell crossed is an arbitrary one. This line is not simply a duality but represents a hierarchy where culture is aligned with human

superiority. Following David Abram (1996), this hierarchical ordering locates “humans” by virtue of our incorporeal intellect, above and apart from all other, ‘merely corporeal’ entities” (p. 48). The nature/culture dichotomy is a socially constructed human creation (Abram, 1996; Cronon, 1996; Evernden, 1992; Nash, 1967, 1989; Plumwood, 1993, 1995, 1998; Warren, 2000). Dualisms such as rationality(culture)/animality(nature) and civilized (culture)/primitive (nature) create what prominent ecofeminist scholar Val Plumwood (1993) has called the “master model” of identity. This identity rests at the core of Western culture as it works to perpetuate the “dualized structure of otherness and negation” (Plumwood, 1993, p. 42).

Historically, humans (Westerners) have used a number of major themes to view/speak of nature either as barren or as virgin territory that has shaped our ways of understanding and talking about “nature.” Far different than the “wilderness experience” metaphors of today, as late as the eighteenth century “to be a wilderness . . . was to be ‘deserted,’ ‘savage,’ ‘desolate,’ ‘barren’—in short a ‘waste’”(Cronon, 1996, p. 70). Common among these descriptions is the idea of an empty landscape devoid of human contact or culture, a place untouched by man, a “virgin wilderness.” Plumwood (1998) writes that the “virginity metaphor, which has been important to both traditional and counter-cultural meanings of wilderness, is highly problematic, both for wilderness and for non-wilderness nature. . . . The virgin concept forces a dualistic conception of land as either totally untouched or ‘not really nature’” (pp. 559–560). This passage singles out certain beings as “natural” and others as artificial (those untouched are natural; those cultivated are not). According to William Cronon (1996), “for many Americans, wilderness stands as the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected the earth” (p. 69). The idea of wilderness solidifies many important concepts for humans, including identification of those entities permitted to reside/live inside the container humans have defined as wilderness.

Defining wilderness allows humans to articulate the ways that wilderness should and/or can be used as well as contributing to the separation of humans from nature. As Cronon (1996) states, “wilderness gets us into trouble only if we imagine that this experience of wonder and otherness is limited to the remote corners of the planet, or that it somehow depends on pristine landscapes we ourselves do not inhabit” (p. 88). Following Cronon, humans must find some way to imagine that we are a part of, and not outside of, wilderness/nature.

The above constructions of nature (wilderness) and culture are disseminated within popular culture via various media. According to Mark Meister and Phyllis Japp (2002), “for most citizens, popular culture is a primary site of meaning construction” (p. 2). Much of what we know about nature is circulated to audiences through the media via film, advertising, and television programming. In recent years, cable television has expanded the prevalence of animal films with the inception of channels such as the Discovery Channel, Animal Planet, and the National Geographic Channel (Horak, 2006). The long history of wildlife documentary is chronicled by Jan-Christopher Horak (2006), who argues, “the popularity of wildlife documentaries

has been increasing steadily over the last hundred years, and seems to be expanding on television in inverse proportion to the number of animals surviving on the planet” (p. 473). *New York Times* writer Bernd Heinrich (2005) writes:

In the last half-century, the hidden reality of nature has been revealed as never before. Our general perceptions, though generally lagging behind, are now catching up. We are becoming weaned from the make-believe world of Walt Disney's 'Bambi.' Is that why high-tech documentaries like 'Microcosmos,' 'Winged Migration,' 'March of the Penguins' and, in a slightly different vein, Werner Herzog's new 'Grizzly Man' are catching on? I suspect that the new breed of nature film will become increasingly mainstream because, as we learn more about ourselves from other animals and find out that we are more like them than supposed, we are now allowed to 'relate' to them, and therefore to empathize. (¶ 8)

Documentary films' depiction of “wild nature” is poised to continue adding to the construction of the nature/culture binary.

The relationship between environment and popular culture is discussed in the anthology *Enviropop*. In the introduction Meister and Japp (2002) write, “Nature, as symbolically constructed in popular culture, is a highly utilitarian construct. Popular culture (through the powerful modes of advertising, board games, newscasts, print news, cable television, greeting cards, film, and animated cartoons) teaches us to emphasize nature's ‘use-value’” (p. 1). While I agree that this is a general tendency, it becomes even more important to examine media texts that challenge ideologies that do not constitute nature as a resource for human use. The authors within this anthology look at how nature is turned into a resource and commodified. Framing nature in terms of its use value maintains the subject (human)/object (nature) binary. However, it is also important to look at media that potentially offer audiences alternative structures of meaning for understanding their relationship with nature. Put another way, we need to not only look at how media commodifies nature and therefore impedes the environmental movement, but also the ways in which media can support a social movement such as environmentalism (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002; Schutten, 2006).

### “Nature” as Recovery Narrative

Carolyn Merchant's (1996) discussion of the Western recovery narrative offers insight into Treadwell's character as well as into the role of the nature/culture duality in Herzog's narrative. Merchant defines the recovery plot in the following manner: “The recovery plot is the long, slow process of returning humans to the Garden of Eden through labor in the earth” (p. 133). To this end, Herzog mentions that Treadwell considers his life in Alaska to be an “Eden.” Merchant defines several components for the “American Heroic Recovery Narrative.” In the beginning of the recovery narrative the hero of a story departs from their home and relocates. Describing Treadwell's departure, Herzog states, “in his diaries, Treadwell speaks often of the human world as something foreign. He made a clear distinction between the bears and the people's

world, which moved further and further into the distance." Thus, there was a clear separation for Treadwell between "civilization" and "nature" so much so that he began to feel more *at home* in the "wild."

There is also selfishness about the Eden that the hero finds. Like Edward Abbey (1968) not wanting "*slobivius americanus*" (p. 190) to taste of the forbidden apple he had found in the deserts of the West, Treadwell challenges those who view his tapes to try to live with the bears as he has done while promising that they will die because it is so difficult. Implicit in Treadwell's challenge is an awareness of the difficulty felt by humans who try to remove themselves from culture. The recovery narrative functions as a form of both the lack of and a desire to return to a paradise lost. Treadwell's old life was dead and all he knew was the life he had developed living with the bears. As he states, "it's the only thing I know, it's the only thing I want to know . . . take care of these animals, take care of this land." Both Abbey and Treadwell appear to perceive themselves as unique humans who can cross the nature/culture line and survive.

After the hero finds the new place or Eden, there are tests and trials between the hero and some sort of villain, ultimately resulting in the receipt of a gift or a victory (Merchant, 1996). Treadwell battled inner demons, having survived a near lethal heroin overdose, alcoholism, and the solitude of Alaska. Furthermore, we can deduce because of his history of substance abuse that Treadwell is both literally and figuratively in recovery. The bears could be said to have simply filled in for his addiction to other substances. Treadwell voiced a lot of anger toward the Park Service and other government agencies in the film. According to Herzog, these agencies were not the enemy or villain for Treadwell but that:

There's a larger, more implacable adversary out there: the people's world and civilization. He only has mockery and contempt for it. He's fighting civilization itself. It is the same civilization that cast Thoreau out of Walden and John Muir into the wild.

This reference to popular nature writers/naturalists from history is a key indication, according to Herzog, that Treadwell was seeking the same journey as so many before him.

What has made the idea of "nature" so potent within culture is that *it* is not human; nature is an exotic, primitive land, and Treadwell sought such a land. However, the encounters contemporary Westerners seek are safer because humans have pushed most of the "dangerous" predators out of the "truly wild" environments they frequently visit. Hence, in much nature writing the human goes into nature and comes out of nature happier and more complete (e.g., Terry Tempest Williams's *Red* and Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*). Just because we may want to go into "nature" to become whole or fulfill some desire does not mean that nature is a harmonious and peaceful whole, as illustrated by Treadwell's end. Following Cronon (1998), it is problematic to live in "urban-industrial civilization but at the same time pretend to ourselves that our real home is in the wilderness" (p. 81). The very idea that urban existence is apposed to wilderness does nothing to help deconstruct the nature/culture binary. There is a kind of paradox here: In following the recovery narrative,

we go into nature to recover from the ills of civilization, but in Treadwell's case nature is not a peaceful Eden but a dangerous place where one's recovery is threatened by death. Put another way, for someone like Treadwell, death by "wild nature" could be viewed as the ultimate recovery in that he is quite literally taken by nature back into the earth.

Treadwell's relationship with the bears was for him a "miracle" that "gave him a life" and thus I read his relationship with the bears as the gift or victory for the hero. More to the point, his belief that he had a relationship or a dialogue with the bears makes this a victory. By Treadwell's own admittance, he is aware of the gift, stating "and I am so thankful for every minute of every day that I found the bears and this place, the Grizzly Maze." Finally, the hero returns to "civilization" and there is a "repair" or recovery of social ills. Treadwell would return to "civilization" (Malibu) after the summers he spent at Katmai with the bears. He used Grizzly People and his video footage as a launching point to educate young people about bears. School principal Phil Cott stated, "his passion for the bears and wildlife was just infectious, and the students loved his stories" (Bear Advocate, 2004). Jewel Palovak a friend of Treadwell's, claims that he reached roughly 10,000 schoolchildren a year (Jans, 2005). "The letters from excited kids, and grateful, impressed teachers poured in" (Jans, 2005, ¶ 9). Treadwell also gave talks on college campuses such as the University of Colorado, Boulder (Jans, 2005). In this way Treadwell functioned as a visitor from the other side of the dualism. Treadwell had visited, and more importantly become a part of, the alien territory of the grizzly bear. As such, he could be said to have made meaningful contact with the other side of the binary, thus working to disrupt the nature/culture dichotomy.

Despite the fact that viewers of the film cognitively knew that Treadwell went back and forth between "civilization" and "nature" for 12 summers, the film presents the recovery as being incomplete. Treadwell does not get to return home permanently. In Treadwell's case, the recovery narrative maintains the culture/nature boundary in that the hero seeks something out of "nature" and rejects "culture" but then returns to "civilization" to address social ills (e.g., free public education about bears). However, his death interrupts the completion of the recovery narrative making it unsatisfying.

### A Tale of Two Narcissists

There is a danger of reproducing the dualism of culture/nature when humans see "nature" or "wilderness" as a place where humans are not (Cronon, 1998). This is problematic because humans are then seen as entirely outside of the "natural" (Cronon, 1998). Both Herzog and Treadwell reinforce this dualism in different ways, and both are narcissistic in their method. As Neil Evernden (1992) points out, "through our conceptual domestication of nature, we extinguish wild otherness even in the imagination" (p. 116). The more we ascribe human qualities and cultural beliefs onto "nature," the less we are able to encounter anything but ourselves (Evernden, 1992). As Cronon (1996) warns, "as soon as we project our values onto the world and begin to assert their primacy by calling them natural, we declare our

unwillingness to consider alternative values . . . Nature becomes our dogma . . . and like all dogmas, it is the death of dialogue and self criticism" (p. 52). Any form of projection, including narcissism, reduces nature/animals to nothing more than a mirror for studying ourselves. In short, any type of anthropomorphizing or husbandry of nature negates the possibilities for dialogue between humans and other-than-humans (for an important exception see Sowards, 2006). The following section explores Treadwell and Herzog's narcissism as a foreclosure of dialogue.

Projection of human qualities *onto* nature is narcissistic: self- or, in this case, human-centered. Many of Treadwell's friends comment on his overall vanity and the pleasure he would have felt at being the "rock star" of Herzog's film. At several points in the film, Treadwell makes comments to the camera like "how's my hair," and his friends mention that in each of his shirt pockets they found a comb. In addition to this surface narcissistic behavior, Treadwell also names the bears (e.g., Aunt Melissa, Demon, Hatchet, Downey, Tabitha, Mr. Chocolate, Ollie) and anthropomorphizes them by how he speaks about them as having human characteristics (like they are his human children).

Furthermore, Treadwell is concerned with crafting an image of himself as a strong but "kind warrior." Illustrated during the film's opening monologue, Treadwell energetically proclaims:

No one ever friggin knew that there are times when my life is on the precipice of death and that these bears can bite, they can kill. And if I am weak, I go down. I love them with all my heart. I will protect them, I will die for them, but *I will not die at their claws and paws*. I will fight. I will be strong. I'll be one of them. I will be the master. But still a *kind warrior*. (italics added)

Treadwell is more concerned with what the potential viewer of his footage will think than the cause to which he proclaims he has dedicated his life. Indeed, there seems to be some desire for others to know that he is out there risking his life for the bears and that he is the "master." To this end, Herzog describes Treadwell as the "guardian of the land" who stylized himself as a "Prince Valiant, fighting the bad guys with their schemes to do harm to the bears." There is an arrogance about Treadwell, illustrated by how he describes what sets him apart from other humans:

I found a way, I found a way to survive with them. Am I a great person? I don't know. I don't know. We're all great people. Everyone has something in them that's wonderful. I'm just different. And I love these bears enough to do it right.

Although he gives everyone the obligatory head nod, that we are all great in our own way, it is clear that he sees himself as exceptionally great and as such very important.

On the other hand, Herzog's narcissism operates more at the level of projections about the human species as a whole. He states that Treadwell's footage "is not so much a look at wild nature as it is an insight into ourselves, our nature. And that, for me, beyond his mission, gives meaning to his life and to his death." Here Herzog admits that he has made a film about "our nature," not the wild nature of the bears. Treadwell's footage solidified that "our nature" is something different than wild nature because the "nature" of humans is culture. Adding further clarification,

Herzog states that because Treadwell's footage provides insight into "our nature," it gives meaning to his life and death. Herzog finds no meaning in Treadwell's footage that speaks into human relations *with* wild nature.

Herzog, dismissive of Treadwell's relationship with non-human animals (he refers to Treadwell as interfering with nature) states, "here I differ with Treadwell, he seemed to ignore the fact that in nature there are predators. I believe the common denominator of the universe is not harmony but chaos, hostility and murder." While Herzog critiques Treadwell for wanting to project his harmonious world onto nature, seeing this as "interference," he then projects the plight of humanity as chaotic and murderous onto "nature." In turn, nature becomes a screen on which we project our own beliefs. In what is the most blatant articulation of this view in the film, Herzog states:

And what haunts me, is that in all the faces of all the bears that Treadwell ever filmed, I discover no kinship, no understanding, no mercy. I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature. To me, there is no such thing as a secret world of the bears. And this blank stare [of the bear] speaks only of a half-bored interest in food. But for Timothy Treadwell, this bear was a friend, a savior.

The nature/culture dualism is not degenerated by anthropomorphizing non-human nature, but it is also not broken down by completely severing humans from nature. Herzog's logic counters Abram's (1996) claim that "intelligence is no longer ours alone but is a property of the earth; we are in it, of it, immersed in its depths . . . each ecology, seems to have its own particular intelligence, its unique vernacular" (p. 262). Understanding the bear as having "no kinship, no understanding," as simply an animal with a "blank stare," robs bears and other animals of any sentience. Similarly, following Evernden (1992), both Herzog and Treadwell "extinguish wild otherness" (p. 116) by projecting a human worldview onto nature. Ultimately, Treadwell and Herzog's narcissistic view of nature maintains the nature/culture binary foreclosing dialogue.

### **On the Possibilities for Dialogue with "Nature"**

Thus far I have argued that the film maintains the nature/culture binary through the recovery narrative and narcissistic anthropomorphism. The following two sections examine, from a rhetorical standpoint, how environmentalists can begin to foster a radically different sense of the relationships between humans and other-than-humans given the dominance of the nature/culture binary. What would it look like to see the ideas of interconnectedness, mutual interdependence, and a "web of life" mentality enacted? Accordingly, the examples provided below illustrate that Treadwell consciously made a choice to become vulnerable to the bears, and as such moved toward a meaningful dialogue with other-than-human nature. Furthermore, in this section I speculate that his death was more than just a bear's instinct to kill (as depicted by Herzog), and as such implies a dialogic relationship between Treadwell and the bears. I contend that despite Treadwell's paternalism and narcissism, his

attempts at dialogue with non-human animals in the film and the shock of Treadwell's manner of death offer starting points toward understanding why people might resist embracing dialogue with non-human "nature."

Working toward a dialogue with "nature" requires that two entities open themselves up to being influenced by each other (Abram, 1996). There are multiple times during the footage recorded by Treadwell where he tells the camera that he is aware of the consequences of his decision to live with grizzlies. Treadwell knowingly entered into a dialogue that made him vulnerable, and he crossed a line when he went from "primordial" encounter to "primordial" dialogue or allowing himself to become vulnerable to being eaten. Evernden (1992) speaks about the realization by naturalist John Fowles that all nature was "anti- or ultra-human, outside, and has no concern with man," and that this difficult realization—that no matter how devoted one is to "nature" it will always be indifferent to humans—can be both liberating and devastating (p. 118). It is liberating because it releases "nature" from being owned by humans and embraces a "divine chaos—not chaos in the sense of disorder or confusion but simply the absence of order" (Evernden, 1992, p. 119). Treadwell's acceptance that he may die from the bears is a symbolic relinquishing of the ordering of the world, which typically places humans at the top of a hierarchy. Evernden writes, "the ordering that makes the world seem comprehensible also makes most of it inaccessible" (p. 119). In this way, Treadwell did attempt dialogue with the bears in that he was willing to open himself up to "nature," the wonder of the "ultra human;" and this meant the strong possibility of getting eaten. What may be troubling for many audiences is that he was willing to relinquish his role as human animal above all other animals.

As mentioned previously, Treadwell said he would "not die at their claws and paws." By using this monologue as the beginning of the film Herzog sets the viewer up for the irony of Treadwell's death, reinforcing the idea that humans do not belong in wild nature because the outcome will likely be human death. However, Treadwell claimed to know the "language of the bear," cautioning that:

It is the old bear, one who is struggling for survival, and an aggressive one at that, who is the one that you must be very careful of. For these are the bears, that on occasion, do, for survival, kill and eat humans. Could Ollie, the big old bear, possibly kill and eat Timothy Treadwell?... I think if you were weak around him, you're going down his gullet, going down the pipe.

The autopsy of the bear who ate Treadwell revealed that it had had a tooth extracted and been tattooed as "Bear 141" by researchers several years earlier (so it had already had an encounter with humans that potentially involved trauma), and was twenty-eight years old, which is considered quite old for a bear. Treadwell had named this bear "Mr. Vicious" which, as Nick Jans, author of *The Grizzly Maze*, states, "is kind of an odd name coming from a bear lover" (quoted in Bryson, 2005, p. 29). Willie Fulton, who found Treadwell and Huguenard, stated that the bear that wound up killing him "was just a dirty rotten bear that he did not like anyway. He [Treadwell] wanted to be friends with [the bear], but it never happened." This comment by

Fulton indicates that this was a bear with whom Treadwell had a poor *relationship*. Others, like Sam Egli, felt that the reason “Treadwell lasted as long in the game as he did was that the bears probably thought there was something wrong with him. Like he was mentally retarded or something.” Fulton and Egli represent two different positions regarding dialogue with nature. Fulton will grant that Treadwell may have had a genuine relationship with the bears, while Egli thinks that Treadwell “lost sight of what was really going on.” However, Egli entertains the idea that bears have the ability to feel sympathy for Treadwell until “something clicked in that bear’s head and he thought, hey, you know, he might be good to eat,” ultimately reducing the bear to pure instinct.

The viewpoints of Fulton and Egli mirror the argument about whether those animals deemed a part of nature function only by pure instinct (mechanistically) or if they have both sensual and sentient aspects. Following the doctrines of Western culture, sensual or sensory experience is seen as a less valued form of knowledge when compared to “reasonable” or scientific knowledge claims (Abram, 1996). Likewise, the nature/culture dualism is predicated on rationality that pits nature against culture. To this end, Abram (1996) not only calls for a subject-to-subject relationship between humans and the other-than-human world, but also a relationship grounded in their common sensual existence. Key for re-acquainting ourselves with the sensory is the idea that “the perceiving being and the perceived being are *of the same stuff*, that the perceiver and the perceived are interdependent and in some sense even reversible aspects of a common animate element, or Flesh, that is *at once both sensible and sensitive*” (italics in original, Abram, 1996, p. 67). As this passage illuminates, dialogic relationships with nature must be subject-to-subject, and accessing the sensual is one step toward this type of relating between humans and other-than-humans. Part of what makes Treadwell interesting is his play with the nature/culture dualism, as illustrated by his relationships with the bears that cannot be explained with human rationality.

It is difficult for human rationality to entertain the thought that the bears *chose* to engage in a relationship with Treadwell for 13 summers before eating him. Treadwell’s relationship with the bears is not easily engaged because this form of engagement requires us to collapse the binary, in turn acknowledging the rational and irrational in both human behavior and non-human behavior. Given the ideological dominance of the nature/culture binary, speculating that the bear killed Treadwell because of a rift in a relationship as opposed to being hungry or bored is a radical shift. The implications of “true” dialogue and a web of life mentality necessitate opening up one’s self to danger. Robert Harrison (1996) writes, “culture is not the allegory of nature; it is the ritualized institution of the irony that puts us at odds with nature. To say it otherwise, I am at odds with my death” (p. 435). In order to weaken the binary and be interconnected in the web of life, human society must fully embrace death as a part of the cycle of life.

### Disassembled Body Parts: On Matters of Meat

Operating from the perspective that Treadwell did have a dialogue with the bears and that he did so by making himself vulnerable to the Other, why is his death so troubling? It is my contention that when the bear mutilated and ate Treadwell, he was turned into a “piece of meat,” disrupting the way humans have ordered “nature” and “culture.” This action by Treadwell forces humans to recognize that enacting a web of life ideology involves risk of death. The following section explores how Treadwell becoming meat disrupts the nature/culture binary.

In her book *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol Adams (1990/2003) discusses the symbolic constructions of what it means to *be* meat. The process of transforming an animal into meat necessitates the erasure of the subject, that is, the animal. When humans kill other animals for food, the animal is transformed into meat. The language used to talk about meat makes the living animal an absent referent. For example, a calf becomes veal. Veal refers to meat, and the absent referent is the living and breathing calf killed to make the meat (Adams, 1990/2003). To be meat is to be weak (object); to eat meat is to be strong (subject). Humans (subject) turn animals into meat (object). This process of making meat is *not* reciprocal; if animals make humans into meat, then the hierarchy of human over animal and culture over nature is threatened. Following Warren (2000), humans as meat harkens back to a primal view “that humans are a part of nature, that humans are both eater and eaten” (p. 135). This reversal is evidenced as troublesome in the film by the commentaries of Sam Egli and the coroner who was involved in cleaning up the tragedy.

Sam Egli assisted Fish and Game with the clean up of the “Treadwell tragedy” to examine the “bear that had done the killing.” Egli comments that the bear “was full of people. It was full of clothing. We hauled away four garbage bags of people out of that bear.” The wearing of clothing equates to people not animals, and here is a point of interruption. Adams (1990/2003) writes that the technique of “interruption destabilizes the text and the culture it represents” (p. 151). In the case of Treadwell’s death, the text is “wild nature.” Interruption happens when “what was once silenced breaks into the text, deflecting attention from the forces that generally silence it, both thematically and textually” (Adams, 1990/2003, p. 149). The realization that there was a human being who was willing to place himself in the animal hierarchy without culture to separate him causes a critical interruption in the human processes of ordering Western culture. According to Plumwood (1995):

The illusion of invulnerability is typical of the mind of the colonizer; and as the experience of being prey is eliminated from the face of the earth, along with it goes something it has to teach about the power and resistance of nature and the delusions of human arrogance. (p. 34)

Making oneself vulnerable resists the ideology of the colonizer (power over) in favor of an ethic that embraces power from within (Warren, 2000). Audiences watching the film see that the plastic bags containing Treadwell and Hugenard’s remains came in what the coroner, Franc Fallico, describes as a “large metal can” in the shape of a

coffin. The coroner chooses to use the word *can* giving a colder meaning and subtly alluding to what else comes in cans—food. He continues:

I mean, these are human beings, and the question I ask is first of all: who are you Amie and Timothy? In the case of Timothy and Amie, what I had were body parts. Just the visual input of seeing a detached human being before my eyes, makes my heart race, makes the hair stand up on the back of my head.

Humans are accustomed to seeing detached body parts daily in the form of packaged meat. However, when it comes to matters of meat, we do not ask, like Fallico did, “who are you?” because we are disconnected from our pre-processed and packaged food. Likewise, with the exception of Fulton, who found the bodies, no one questioned who this bear was to Treadwell. Fulton discusses the ironic part of Treadwell’s story, mentioning that the tough part of the bear dying is that “Tim would have never wanted to see any bear killed even if they had killed him.” And as is commonly known, the one thing that will get any animal killed is the act of killing a human. Seeing a human animal become food for a “wild” animal interrupts the narrative that humans are above animals. Because of social construction (culture), we do not even see ourselves *as* animal. As mentioned, hierarchical ordering locates “humans,” by virtue of our incorporeal intellect, above and apart from all other, ‘merely corporeal,’ entities” (Abram, 1996, p. 48). Meat makes it evident that intellect does not make a difference. Meat is nothingness—it has no intellect.

Moreover, the coroner has heard the tapes of the killing in order to try to piece together the story of the deaths. For the camera, he tells his interpretation of the story of Amie fighting off the bear, hitting it with a frying pan trying to save Timothy while he yells for her to run away. After the coroner finishes recounting the graphic death tape, there is a long pause where Herzog chose to keep the camera on him after he was done talking—he could have ended the shot when he stopped speaking. This pause functions as an interruption—bodies ripped into parts is not an acceptable death for “civilized” humans, only for animals, even though humans *are* a part of “nature.” In this case, the absent referent is the tape where humans are being forcibly reduced to the level of “primitive nature.” In an article detailing her surviving a crocodile attack, including the infamous death roll, Plumwood (1995) writes:

One reason why death is such a horror in the Western tradition (unless reinterpreted along Platonic lines so as to maintain the separation) is that it involves the forbidden mixing of these hyper-separated categories, the dissolution of the sacred-human into the profane-natural. Death in the jaws of a crocodile multiplies these forbidden boundary breakdowns, combining the decomposition of the body with active animal triumph over the human species. Crocodile predation thus threatens the dualistic visions and divisions which justify rational human mastery of the planet. Humans may themselves be foremost among predators, but they themselves must not be food for worms, and especially they must not be prey for crocodiles. (p. 34)

Likewise, humans must not be food for bears, and Treadwell’s acceptance of his vulnerability with the grizzlies challenges the dualism by crossing a line into “profane nature” through his becoming prey. It is as if we can stomach humans-killing-humans

better than other animals-killing-humans because it keeps humans at the top of the hierarchy. In addition to respect for the dead, it appears that the tape is absent because it is a slaughter of a human by a non-human animal. Treadwell's death turns humans into objects, making visible how humans objectify animals to maintain the nature/culture binary.

### ***Grizzly Man* and Environmental Ethics**

What does *Grizzly Man* bring to bear on environmental ethics? According to Cronon (1996), “any way of looking at nature that encourages us to believe we are separate from nature—as wilderness tends to do—is likely to reinforce environmentally irresponsible behavior” (p. 87). How do we begin to do what Cronon asserts and erode the nature/culture line? While many authors have written about environmental ethics from a diverse range of perspectives (Abram, 1996; Cronon, 1996; Griffin, 1978; Leopold, 1949; Merchant, 1996; Nash, 1967, 1989; Rolston, 2002; Singer, 1995; Warren, 2000; Williams, 2001), in this section I briefly situate *Grizzly Man* in relation to the environmental ethics of Holmes Rolston III (2002), Aldo Leopold (1949), and Karen Warren (2000). These three authors’ environmental ethics are particularly useful in making sense of how Treadwell’s actions, as portrayed in Herzog’s film, can erode the nature/culture binary.

In his essay “Values in and Duties to the Natural World,” Rolston (2002) stresses the importance of pushing the subject/object line further and further back until we have reached “systemic value” in biotic community. He first discusses higher animals, then organisms, followed by species, and finally ecosystems. The subject/object distinction is null and void when we have reached an understanding that encompasses systemic value. Rolston asserts that for humans “the best and easiest breakthrough past the traditional boundaries of interhuman ethics is made when confronting higher animals” (p. 33). In short, the first place to build an environmental ethic surrounds the connections humans can make with non-human animals. Treadwell was working at the level of “interhuman ethics” (Rolston) with higher animals in what appears, from his video footage, to be a concerted effort to make connections and identify with bears in a way not accepted by rational human paradigms. This is important because the nature/culture binary, as I have stated, relies on rationality, and only by resisting such rationality will humans be able to shift into a more sentient and sensual (corporeal) relationship with the natural world.

Much like Rolston’s (2002) ethics at the level of ecosystems is Aldo Leopold’s (1949) land ethic and biotic community. Leopold asserts that “the land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals or collectively: the land” (p. 204). He argues that land ethic “changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it” (Leopold, 1949, p. 204). To this end, Treadwell can be viewed as above the land-community when he acts as a protector of the land/bears. On the other hand, Treadwell could also be viewed as a “plain member” or “citizen” of the land because he merged together with the land as just another member, also vulnerable to

all the stresses and strains on the ecosystem of which he was a part. For example, during the summer that Treadwell and Huguenard died there were many strains on the ecosystem. Bears depend on berries to make it through the long Alaskan winters; during the summer of the attack, the berry crop had failed due to “freak weather conditions” (Jans, 2005, ¶ 16). Furthermore, “the salmon runs were at least average, or even above normal,” causing above-average numbers of bears to congregate at the water (i.e., the normal 15 grew to 60 bears), resulting in more aggression among the bears (Jans, 2005, ¶ 16). The weather, the berry shortage, and the amount of salmon were all affected by human action regardless of whether or not these bears ever actually came into contact with a human. Put differently, if “pure” nature is nature without human intervention, there is no such thing as wilderness/nature. In short, Treadwell could not pollute an otherwise “pure” wilderness because the wilderness was already altered by humans in multiple ways. Because Treadwell was bound to the land (enmeshed in the ecosystem), his death was affected by all the human-influenced factors listed above.

Leopold (1949) also writes that the conqueror is assumed to know what makes the “community clock tick, and just what and who is valuable, and what and who is worthless, in community life,” but that he ultimately knows neither of these (p. 204). The conqueror is ignorant because they do not *know* the land—they have no sense of place (Leopold). I argue that Hertzog colonizes Treadwell’s footage and can only see “in all the faces of all the bears . . . no kinship, no understanding, no mercy” because, as conqueror, Hertzog is only privy to what he defines as the raw “indifference of nature.” He has no ethic of the land where Treadwell lived for 13 summers; he has no sense of that place.

Furthermore, Leopold (1949) argued that wildlife research should be looked at as a “sport” where there would be no professional “monopoly on research,” leaving a space for amateur researchers (pp. 184–185). The problem with the professional monopoly on research, according to Leopold, was that it only allowed “make-believe voyages of discovery, to verify what [the] professional authority already knows” (p. 185). Treadwell is depicted as violating the monopoly on research because his credentials do not match what Western culture has deemed an acceptable person to spend time with the bears. For example, biologist Matthias Breiter was camping with a small group of photographers the summer Treadwell and Huguenard died, and observed the strange bear aggression discussed above (Jans, 2005). There are no claims that researchers such as Breiter should not be allowed to camp among the bears because he is a “professional” and as such given permission to glean a sense of place from the Alaskan land and its inhabitants. In this way, I see the work of Treadwell as an example of Leopold’s wildlife research as sport. Indeed, if Treadwell’s adventures over the summers he lived there were labeled as “extreme sport,” and commercially exploited, they would most likely have been viewed as acceptable rather than Treadwell often being depicted as an eccentric suffering from some sort of mental illness. In fact, uncovering the “illusion of invulnerability” discussed by Plumwood (1995) might offer a recovery of some sense of danger, of being prey, an

important lesson for humans if we are to begin to see ourselves as a part of a biotic community.

One cannot see oneself as a part of a biotic community and still subscribe to a hierarchy where human beings are seen as better than all other manifestations of life on the planet. Karen Warren (2000) illustrates how the ecological component of ecofeminism explores important insights about human and other-than-human interactions and how these interactions (or lack thereof) have the possibility to (re)construct human understandings of the earth. The nature/culture dualism contributes to the “logic of domination” (Warren) by situating human beings hierarchically above other entities on the planet. Oppressive frameworks such as this block these new constructions of human understanding from coming to fruition.

Warren (2000) also identifies five types of power within human culture, three of which are particularly relevant to Treadwell as represented in Herzog’s film. The first type of power is “*power-over* power” which presumes an “up-down relationship” (p. 199). The second form of power is “*power-with* power,” defined as “coalitionary, solidarity, or other relatively equalizing power relations with others” (p. 200). Finally, there is “*power-toward* power—a process or movement from one habit, lifestyle, set of behaviors, or belief system to another” (p. 200). Treadwell gives up his power-over position by becoming vulnerable. This choice threatens “man’s privilege,” questioning why a human would want to give up such power. The fact that he voluntarily gives up his protected, privileged, power-over position illustrates a strong environmental ethic, one that requires sacrifice. Treadwell illustrates for audiences that humanity will have to become vulnerable, to give something up, in order to cease operating from oppressive frameworks. He illustrates this by equalizing power relations with the bears, constructing a power-with relationship. In addition, audiences can see Treadwell move to a power-toward power as he takes up a new system of beliefs and behaviors according to the ethic of the land.

Taken together, Treadwell embodies an environmental ethic that includes pieces from Leopold (1949), Rolston (2002), and Warren’s (2000) conceptions, illustrating what it might look like for humans to live a web-of-life mentality. Any ethic that threatens human superiority functions to resist an oppressive paradigm where nature is separate from culture. I see this illustrated in the film when ecologist Marc Gaede reads from some “vitriolic hate mails” about Treadwell. One person wrote, “Stereotypical environmentalist. Just as long as the donations keep coming furthering the antihuman eco-religion as a noble cause, who cares about reality?” This letter clearly identifies the writer’s problem: if you promote the environment you are anti-human. Specifically, the writer’s hostility is due to Treadwell’s jarring of the nature/culture binary. In this letter, “reality” rests in the realm of “culture” not “nature.” Treadwell’s life and death present a critical interruption that creates opportunities to challenge dominant paradigms. There was a breach (Turner, 1982), he was eaten, causing a crisis, violating or transgressing the binary. Herzog’s choice for the overarching narrative of the film was to maintain the barrier, not to take the opportunity to change the way we view nature/culture. Moreover, the response of this anti-environmental writer indicates how far environmentalists will have to go to

unhinge the nature/culture binary toward a “nature” where humans and other-than-humans are all sentient, sensual beings who can have dialogic relationships.

### **Breaking the Chains of the Nature/Culture Dualism**

As the tagline for *Grizzly Man* stated, “In nature, there are boundaries. One man spent the last 13 years of his life crossing them.” Yet, there are no boundaries in nature: It is humans who put the boundaries around “nature” and “culture.” Viewers of the film watch the recovery narrative unfold where Treadwell is the (human) subject going into nature. The narrative and the viewer’s identification are then disrupted when he becomes meat (object) and in turn becomes “pure nature.” This reversal may trouble some viewers because humans do not get eaten, they eat. Treadwell’s life and death as portrayed in the film can work to jar the status quo by interrupting the nature/culture dualism. In fact, we could say that Treadwell’s eccentric life with the bears makes sense by not making sense, illustrating the free forms of “nature.” Documentary nature films as a part of the “public screen” (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002) potentially offer audiences alternative structures of meaning for understanding their relationship with nature. Careful analysis of such films can offer insights into how the environmental movement might work to deconstruct dominant dualities for mainstream audiences. It is not only important to look at how media commodifies nature, impeding the environmental movement, but also the ways in which documentary film (and other media) can support a social movement such as environmentalism.

An underlying motivation for this essay has been to imagine what it would look like to see the ideas of interconnectedness, mutual interdependence, and a web-of-life mentality enacted. Documentaries such as Herzog’s *Grizzly Man*, while possessing great rhetorical potential to support environmental ethics, also highlight for audiences that supporting environmental ethics requires sacrifice. Moving to an ethic of environmental sustainability involves considerable relinquishing of control and a heightened vulnerability of humans to other-than-human forces. The interruption and the shock of Treadwell’s manner of death provide insight into why people might resist embracing dialogue with non-human nature. Nature can be scary and dangerous. Dialogue with nature requires humans to give up some comforts in life. Indeed, obsession about cultural comforts is the material result of denying that we *are* “nature.” Seeing humans as all “culture” and no “nature” works to uphold our perceived superiority over nature and does not truly embrace environmental sustainability.

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