We were latecomers in a well-established process that had gone on for fifty million years. The four-legged carnivores and their prey had long since learned that an animal, watched long enough, gradually dissolved into signs. It left the marks that came to represent it: footprints, urine, secretions, feces, molted antlers, scratchings and rubbings, gnawed stems, bones, feathers, beds, diggings, nests, tracks, and bits of fur as well as an immense range of sounds and smells unavailable to us.

—Paul Shepard, *The Others*, p. 24

Good writing is ‘wild’ language.
—Gary Snyder, ‘Language Goes Two Ways’, p. 130

Poststructuralist thought developed two intriguing yet seemingly contradictory notions about textuality. First, from the work of Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, and numerous other theorists we drew the notion that the term ‘text’ can be extended to other media beyond the covers of the book. Film, music videos, photographs, fashion shows, and body building, to name just a familiar few, were declared texts, readable using methods not so dissimilar from those associated with reading poetry or fiction. The second poststructuralist theorem about textuality was that there is nothing outside the text, which is usually interpreted as meaning that we have no access to the real *per se* but only to its representations. Just as signs are not the things themselves—the map is not the territory—texts do not refer outside or beyond themselves to the world at large. Texts refer to other texts: textuality is intrinsically intertextual. One cannot read ‘through’ a text to the world: that is simply the illusion of realism. That is, even as I glance up from my computer screen and look out the window to the Rocky Mountains in the distance, my mind involuntarily (even violently against my will)
jerks to the traditions of the sublime and the picturesque, vaguely remembered lessons about tectonic plate movements from a course on Earth and Planetary Sciences, tidbits of mountaineering history, the mountain photographs of Byron Harmon, swivelling racks of postcards, fragments of memories from hikes I have taken, and so on. The very window in my study comes into play, framing my response as aesthetic; it too is part of my momentary construction of ‘mountain.’ In other words, we are surrounded by texts, which implies that the universe is readable, but paradoxically, according to the same poststructuralists, it is in the very act of reading these texts that we find ourselves caught in a textual loop or Möbius strip from which we can never escape to the world ‘outside.’

Our debt to poststructuralist theories of textuality therefore includes the corollary that the ‘natural’ world is not one. That is, the natural world is not the binary opposite of culture or civilization. It is not a place unmarked by human signs and indications. Some go so far as to claim that the ‘natural’ world is no less socially constructed than an urban environment or even a film for that matter. In his essay ‘The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature’ William Cronon summarizes the idea of the social construction of wilderness. He writes:

Far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, it [wilderness] is quite profoundly a human creation—indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history. It is not a pristine sanctuary where the last remnant of an untouched, endangered, but still transcendent nature can for at least a little while longer be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization. (1996, p. 69)

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1 Interpretations of Derrida’s comment that there is nothing outside the text are frequently misleading. What Derrida meant in that oft-quoted sentence is cogently summarized by Alex Callinicos, in his obituary of Derrida:

Derrida’s most famous saying must be understood in this context. It was translated into English (rather misleadingly) as, “There is nothing outside the text”. In fact, Derrida wasn’t, like some ultra-idealists, reducing everything to language (in the French original he actually wrote “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte”—“There is no outside-text”). Rather he was saying that once you see language as a constant movement of differences in which there is no stable resting point, you can no longer appeal to reality as a refuge independent of language. Everything acquires the instability and ambiguity that Derrida claimed to be inherent in language. (Callinicos 2004)