INTRODUCTION

Modern Environmentalism’s Identity Politics

How can the individual self maintain and increase its uniqueness while also being an inseparable aspect of the whole system wherein there are no sharp breaks between self and the other?

Bill Devall and George Sessions, Deep Ecology

... nature loves the idea of the individual, if not the individual himself...

Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

Twentieth and twenty-first century literature teems with scenes of dissolution, moments at which a text appears to erase individuals’ sense of self-identity in natural environs. Few such moments have gripped the popular imagination more tightly than Jon Krakauer’s 1996 account of a young man’s disappearance in Into the Wild. In his journals and letters, as well as Krakauer’s own narration, Christopher McCandless dismisses his self-identity in favor of identification with the ecosystem as a whole. His personal transformation does not merely reiterate the longstanding American wilderness narrative in which typically white male subjects depart a civilizational sphere (over here) for a natural one (over there). Into the Wild supplements that narrative’s traditional distinction between nature and culture with a psychoanalytic one. McCandless abandons his civilized ego for an ostensibly natural unconscious. Into the Wild is neither the first nor the last text to rewrite the wilderness script as a story of dissolution. The dissolution motif characterizes numerous literary and political texts of the past fifty years, signaling a broader shift in the representation of nature and self in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Identity, not environment, is what we talk about when we talk about wilderness today.

Wild Abandon is about the cultural narratives that emerged when political radicals of the 1960s and 1970s joined ecology with psychoanalysis. I do not
mean that environmentalists took part in postwar analytic institutions. Rather, I want to suggest that psychoanalytic thought furnished one among many vocabularies with which activists and intellectuals responded to the sudden shift in subjectivity occasioned by ecology’s entrance to the political scene. Ecology first reached a lay audience in 1962, when Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* and consequently inaugurated the modern environmental movement. That same year, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) drafted its *Port Huron Statement*, which announced the organization of a New Left premised on “natural” libertarian alternatives to the “artificial” liberal order of the postwar United States. Movement leadership often articulated this opposition psychoanalytically, in terms of repression, elevating self-liberation to the forefront of their program. Student radicals, as well as participants in the broader counterculture and successive new social movements, sought not only to arrange authentic political institutions but also to recover authentic self-identities. At the same time, the advent of ecology—a science devoted to the myriad biophysical interrelationships that both constitute and undermine individuals—presented a challenge to selfhood’s apparent sanctity. For some radicals, however, ecology merely shifted the scope of authenticity. The New Left’s psychoanalytic framework made possible an enduring logic that grounded authentic identity in the whole ecosystem rather than in the limited individual.

This book will argue that an interaction between ecological science and midcentury social theory gave shape to what I term an *identity politics of ecology* (IPE). Scholars in American and environmental studies customarily view the rise of modern environmentalisms (both mainstream and radical) in the context of the new social movements, the diversity of political commitments that proliferated in the late 1960s and early 1970s, from women’s liberation to Black Power. Rarely does commentary address the possibility that such causes have at times taken identity, rather than environment itself, as their principal motivation. As I will argue, the partnership writers forged between ecology and psychoanalysis resulted in a uniquely universal account of identity. In this respect, *Wild Abandon* complicates the standard narrative advanced by social historians that the rise of identity as a social heuristic in the 1970s marked the gradual demise of psychoanalysis as a structural theory and the abrupt disintegration of political universalism. Even as various identity-based movements began to critique American liberalism and its pretense to universal scope in the 1960s and 1970s, radical environmentalists mobilized rhetorical strategies employed across racial, ethnic, and gendered activisms—specifically appeals to authenticity—to reinvigorate universalism as a political value.
A considerable body of activist and intellectual discourse approached ecology not only as a material context that shapes conditions for social, political, and economic action, but also as an exceptionally inclusive identity position defined by shared ecological circumstances. Ecology’s entry into mainstream conversation in the 1960s had radicals scrambling to account for the “connections, interchanges, and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures” whose disclosure disrupted conventional narratives of selfhood.\(^1\) When I refer to an identity politics of ecology, I mean any response to this conundrum, from midcentury to the present, that has contended that authentic identity inheres in the matrix of one’s ecological interconnections rather than in culturally mediated identity positions such as race, ethnicity, or gender (whose social construction would render them merely artificial by comparison).

The IPE holds that to be authentic is not to claim discrete selfhood or even community affiliation, but to identify holistically with the ecosystem writ large. This appeal to ecological authenticity, as opposed to personal or community authenticity, stemmed from Movement radicals’ general anxiety regarding American culture’s potentially repressive functions. Widely read social analyses such as C. Wright Mills’s *White Collar* (1951), William H. Whyte’s *Organization Man* (1956), and the works of Herbert Marcuse informed a political culture intent on accentuating self-expression and fulfillment to overcome the oppressive normativity of preceding decades. Unlike the New Left and counterculture’s commitment to personal authenticity, however, the IPE’s commitment to ecological authenticity arose from a conviction that self-identity is merely another repressive formation to dispose of. Environmentalist gestures toward self-dismissal are recurring yet critically divisive fixtures of American literary and political discourse. Even so, the historical gestation and multidisciplinary appeal of contemporary iterations of that tradition remain largely unexamined. How do we account for their appearance in such divergent contexts as, for example, materialist philosophy and Instagram? We do so by observing that the writers who deploy such claims participate in the same cultural narrative. Rather than treat the IPE as a coherent movement, I understand it as a shared rhetorical tendency uniting disparate perspectives under a common appeal to ecological authenticity.

To frame ecology in terms of the narratives told about it is to consider the consequences of those narratives today. One of the IPE’s effects has been a contortion of ecology (a deeply anti-essentialist concept) into a fixed identity position of its own, one whose claim to authenticity has denied the importance of the contingent identities we experience socially. The notion...
of fixed identity has been passé among scholars in the humanities for some time, but it survives in both mainstream and radical sectors of environmental thought, at the expense of people of color, women, queer folks, and others. Ecological authenticity flattens sociocultural distinctions, inviting a certain political quiescence, a neglect for the standpoints that make political action – environmentalist or otherwise – intelligible and necessary to begin with. It also influences critical practice in addition to mainstream representations of wilderness. For this reason, *Wild Abandon* presents something of a cautionary tale about our cautionary tales, a reflection on the historical premises and consequent fitness of certain narratives about who we are and what we must do in the face of environmental challenges. To this end, I turn to numerous representations of ecological authenticity across a variety of political and literary texts to trace the IPE’s development and contestation over the past fifty years, drawing on diverse histories of social, ecological, and psychoanalytic thought to show when, where, how, and why modern environmentalists have fashioned their work as an identity politics. I attempt to be judicious in using (and scrutinizing) terms such as *ecology, authenticity*, and *nature*, which, though exhaustively overused (or misused), remain useful critical touchstones given their contextual cachet. To be clear, I am less interested in psychoanalytic or ecological theory as bodies of knowledge than I am in the way certain writers made use of ideas borrowed from them. To examine these influences side by side is to shift our understanding of environmental politics and representation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

**Ecological Authenticity and the Wilderness Narrative**

Modern environmentalist writing, Dana Phillips notes, has often proceeded by “troping on a vocabulary borrowed from ecology.” Much of it has riffed on radical psychoanalysis as well. In the years following *Silent Spring*’s publication, New Left activists and countercultural icons sought to square ecology with existing radical commentary on postindustrial America. Such analyses often viewed psychic organization as inseparable from institutional conditions of oppression. The poet Gary Snyder observed this tradition closely when he mused that “there is a problem with the . . . human ego. Is it a mirror of the wild and of nature? I think not: for civilization itself is ego gone to seed and institutionalized in the form of the State.” Snyder’s comment aligns the ego with “civilization” and an expansive, primordial non-ego – a lack of self – with the wild aspects of “nature,” drawing an opposition between artificial and natural that
corresponds to an opposition between “ego” and “eco,” the self and the system. Environmentalist writers like Snyder profess not (or not only) that nature and culture are spatially distinguishable, as preservationists of earlier generations had done, but that both culture and our resulting sense of selfhood construct themselves too thickly over psychic nature, obscuring it. This sort of statement concerns neither ostensibly pure wild spaces nor ecology so much as it does identity.

The wilderness concept – defined by Greg Garrard as “nature in a state uncontaminated by civilization” – has played an important yet powerfully malleable role in American cultural history. The idea’s flexibility has enabled it to crystallize numerous political, social, economic, and environmental preoccupations and anxieties over the course of centuries. Remarks such as Snyder’s demonstrate the concept’s continued prominence in the age of ecology, despite ecological science’s disruption of the notion that nature and culture comprise cleanly divisible spheres. Like psychoanalysis, ecology came to enjoy special prominence in the 1960s as a “subversive science,” despite its descriptive rather than ideological aims. “Ecology,” the philosopher Paul Shepard wrote in 1967, “has become an in word.” Rachel Carson’s exposé in Silent Spring divulged not that pesticides threaten a distinctively separate natural world, but that “substances of incredible potential for harm” reach consumers through a variety of ecological pathways in the city, the suburb, and the home. As events such as the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill hastened awareness of environmental catastrophe, ecology’s pervasive, interpenetrative scope rose to the forefront of American concern. If wilderness or the wild had conceptually cordoned nature from the civilized and industrialized for environmentalists of preceding decades, Carson made clear that such an imagined barrier had always been porous.

Nonetheless, the concept of ecology has, like wilderness, experienced a certain “discursive elasticity that allows it to be used to structure the world in any number of ways.” The science of ecology describes very real material networks and interactions. Even so, such processes are subject to the mediation of interpretive cultural practices. Our understanding of material reality proceeds in part as a social construction, a situated perspective no less real for its fabrication over time. One could hardly disagree with the very basic premise that human biological functions fundamentally entangle us in complex and lively networks of matter. From a political perspective, however, there is something banal about the frankly obvious statement that “everything is connected.” Everything will remain connected if we preserve ecosystems or pollute them beyond recognition. Our
actions depend less on the fact of our interrelated condition than on what Snyder refers to as our “rhetoric of ecological relationships,” the narratives we tell about our interactions with nonhuman others. 8

Without a doubt, conventional cultural histories of postwar American environmentalism have foregrounded those ecological narratives, typically distinguishing between mainstream and progressive paradigms. That is, environmentalism exists in a variety of modes or genres, each of which subscribes to a relatively recognizable set of representational conventions that scholarship in the environmental humanities has helped to illuminate. For example, among capitalist practices of “green consumerism” and traditional approaches to wilderness preservation, ecology plays the role of a natural “balance” that humans have disrupted but might yet fix, through either purchasing power or legislative restraint. By contrast, environmental justice coalitions have demonstrated how ecological change has disproportionately impacted communities historically disadvantaged along lines of race, class, ethnicity, indigeneity, and gender, casting both place and people as victims of capitalist exploitation. Recently, the looming threats and pervasive realities of climate change have inspired important work that joins elements of preservationist and environmental justice narratives under a global banner. These conventions change over time, find inconsistent expression, and, perhaps most importantly, exist side by side with other priorities and strategies. Still, without a doubt, they represent some of the most vital environmentalist traditions of the past fifty years.

At the same time, our familiar taxonomies of environmental thought continue to treat the wilderness concept predominantly as a spatial narrative about natural environments that exist in opposition to civilization. An account like Snyder’s appears to maintain preservationist interest in untouched environments, but its marked investment in nature’s relationship to the ego reveals a deep concern with authentic identity rather than, or in addition to, authentic environs. Scholars of American environmentalism have occasionally touched on this tendency in isolated instances, but not as a deeply ingrained cultural narrative that has continually surfaced across multiple contexts. Nor have they considered the possibility that the simultaneous emergence of ecology and personal authenticity as progressive values in the 1960s influenced the direction of environmental thought. Snyder’s opposition between wild nature and civilized ego reframes wilderness not as an environment but as an identity category, a condition rather than a location. The revision is no accident. Representations of wilderness shifted over the course of the 1960s and 1970s in response to identity’s rise to political prominence.
Such a transition was only made possible by the long arm of what Doug Rossinow calls the American New Left’s “politics of authenticity,” the student movement’s broad commitment to the liberation, fulfillment, and singular identity of the self. Authenticity remains an opaque term at best, its meaning having shifted routinely over its history of use. The word is poorly defined in the Port Huron Statement, despite the fact that the manifesto begins with a declaration that the “goal of man and society should be . . . finding a meaning in life that is personally authentic.” The term never found consistent definition, but as one activist wrote in 1962, “not systems or institutions . . . but the person, in his totality, in his freedom, in his originality and in his essential dignity” remained “the ultimate and most irreducible value” across the Movement. According to the New Left platform, the liberal establishment subdued the self in its perpetuation of oppressive social institutions, its willingness to police behaviors, maintain class inequities, and entertain the rampant anticommunism of the previous decade. Student radicals viewed the Marxist socialism of past generations with similar suspicion. “Humanity is estranged from its authentic possibilities,” the psychiatrist and social critic R. D. Laing wrote in 1967, and from the New Left’s perspective both postwar liberalism and the Old Left preserved a social environment “alienated” from “a natural system.” Only direct democratic governance could liberate an overly managed population from the artificiality of a rigged party system beholden to corporate interests. Laing’s contention that the “experience of oneself and others as persons is primary and self-validating” resonated with the New Left as powerfully as Herbert Marcuse’s call for a “great refusal” of capitalist economic and political traditions. As Rossinow puts it, a stringent “opposition between the natural, or the ‘real,’ and the artificial” came to constitute “a kind of preface to any discussion of specific practices and values that ought to change.” As the call for liberation expanded beyond exclusively economic concerns, personal matters became, for a variety of movements, political.

The New Left, for whom social liberation was only possible alongside self-liberation, largely derived its program from a coterie of intellectuals who positioned authenticity, personal fulfillment, and direct democratic governance against the artifice of postindustrial civilization. Anthropologically speaking, civilization is a pluriform concept that changes according to context. As Chapter 1 will explore in detail, however, student radicals largely came to understand the idea of “civilization” according to a Freudian narrative that collapsed this diversity into an abstract totality: civilization set against a primordial, ostensibly pure psychic nature. Under the influence of a primordial, ostensibly pure psychic nature. Under the influence
of thinkers such as Marcuse, the era’s politics of authenticity drew disproportionate inspiration from a loose collection of social theorists who joined psychoanalysis with libertarian socialism in the 1950s and 1960s, a “Freudian Left” that also included Wilhelm Reich and Norman O. Brown. A variety of postwar conversations circled around the social dimensions of repression, playing out among a diverse cadre of thinkers who opposed institutional ego psychology’s fixation on producing “normal” individuals. Despite their criticism (as well as their differences), these figures all preserved certain psychoanalytic concepts in their work. In 1974, the feminist psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell wrote that the “generalizable” features of Laing’s writing established his popularity as “one of [the] chief spokesmen . . . of the preponderant ‘personalism’ of 1960s radicalism.” Laing and other psychoanalytic revisionists introduced “the radical counter-ideology of the restoration of ‘whole’ . . . people” in response to “oppositional stereotypes of man/woman, sane/insane, black/white and so on.” However, the Movement’s psychoanalytic influence often replicated the “oppositional” quality of such dualisms by merely replacing them with new ones: whole/not-whole, free/repressed, and real/artificial. The New Left never succeeded in defining “authenticity” in its founding documents, but its Freudian model gave shape to a pronounced, if inchoate, interest in liberating the repressed unity of the psyche.

The Movement viewed the ecological issues Carson introduced to a wide public as largely inseparable from this broader program of self-liberation—the “restoration” of “whole” subjects. That changes acted upon environments by the corporate state impacted human health seemed yet another social limitation on individuals’ quality of life. However, as concepts jointly applied to liberation politics, ecology and authenticity made contentious bedfellows. Their interaction in the 1960s coincided with Movement politics’ visualization of authenticity specifically as “a state of unity with the self.” This standard of “unity” manifested in extravagantly inconsistent ways across the countercultural landscape. Student leaders at SDS broadcast their commitment to self-fulfillment even as other figures, such as countercultural drug gurus, preached a gospel of self-deterioration. “Unity” came to signify, by turns, the harmony of a discrete individual or of a holistic system in which the self seems to lose its integrity. Nowhere did this discordance prove more salient than in radical flirtations with ecology, whose disclosure of biophysical interconnections among organisms undermined the notion that there ever could be a singularly unitary self. The natural unity of the ecosystem would always trump the merely apparent unity of the self.
In the New Left framework, this dilemma presented a moral as well as an ontological quandary. Among radicals of the student left, as well as the new social movements that followed, “political potential” proceeded from “alienation.” For the mostly white members of SDS, however, feelings of existential alienation largely came to supersede the political alienation they located in people of color, which motivated identity politics along lines of race, ethnicity, and gender that emerged in the years to come. The spiritual undertones of the New Left’s search for “wholeness” imparted a distinctively moralistic flavor to the politics of authenticity that dominated the 1960s. The authentic self was right and the social order that would repress, alienate, and/or exploit it was wrong. In seeming contrast to this creed of self-fulfillment, mainstream environmentalists of the decade preached a gospel of self-renunciation, of making do with less to protect the wilderness. Despite their apparent disagreement, though, SDS and preservationism largely obeyed the same moral logic: what is unspoiled is right.15

How does one reconcile the rightness of the unrepressed self with the rightness of a nature defined by its ecological intricacy? For a figure like Chris McCandless, one simply equates self with ecosystem. McCandless styles himself “free from society” and therefore unconstrained by a socially mediated ego.16 There are spiritual undertones to these proclamations as well. They evoke the “oceanic feeling” that Sigmund Freud describes in Civilization and Its Discontents (1930), one of the many psychoanalytic touchstones that informed the New Left and counterculture. For Freud, beatific apprehensions of “limitlessness,” of subjective continuity with one’s surroundings, hark back to an earlier, infantile stage of psychic development, an originary inability to “differentiate between what is internal – what belongs to the ego – and what is external – what emanates from the outer world” that predates civilization and its repressions.17 For Freud, the ego – the part of the psyche that registers a bounded sense of self – is neither a positive nor a negative thing. It simply is. For McCandless, however, the fact that selfhood is socially constructed renders it unnatural, an illusion that masks the “limitlessness” of our ecological interconnection. He pursues a fantasy of subjective merger with his surroundings because this state of affairs strikes him as natural rather than artificial, unspoiled and therefore right. As such, he preserves a certain moral investment in authenticity even as he expands authenticity to include all of the ecosystem. This fantasy of self-erasure in nature paradoxically positions the vanished (often white and male) self as the privileged subject of both environmentalism and a seemingly anti-identitarian stance.
I use the term *identity politics of ecology* to loosely capture any environmentalism that makes this move. The IPE invokes ecological authenticity by suggesting that because selfhood is socially constructed, the ecosystem as a whole comprises our most essential identity. Posthumanist philosophers have long noted that ecology disturbs the supposed inviolability of the human subject passed down by Enlightenment thought. Because the body houses microbes, absorbs nutrients, and nourishes the soil and other creatures with waste and decomposition, one cannot easily draw clear distinctions between self and environment. This premise ordinarily troubles the very concept of identity, but the IPE mobilizes it to recapitulate identity in essentialist terms. The machinations of what Marcuse referred to in 1955 as “repressive civilization” obscure the fact that we all share the same status as matter. That matter circulates ecologically. *Ergo*, the ecosystem is all of us. An appeal to ecological authenticity is in this respect always an appeal to universal authenticity, in that it flattens distinctions among individuals and communities into a single, unified identity position: the ecosystem. Sociocultural forms repress this state of nature.

A writer invokes the IPE any time he or she frames ecology in terms of authenticity as the Freudian Left and its acolytes understood it—that is, as a matter of psychic alienation. If selfhood emerges from civilization’s repressions, then selfhood itself is responsible for our removal from a natural condition of ecological wholeness, a “unity” both psychic and material, “a state of oneness” that the analyst Harold F. Searles described in 1960 in terms of the billions of atoms that “make up our body . . . second-hand.” The presence of psychoanalytic concepts in environmentalist writing is not merely a matter of coincidence. As Chapter 1 will explore in more depth, many New Left voices turned to ecological politics in earnest when the Movement began to fracture late in the decade, such that Left Freudian rhetoric transferred directly to environmentalist discourse. As new generations drew inspiration from their predecessors, those narratives spread. Paul Shepard explicitly built on *Civilization and Its Discontents* in *Nature and Madness* (1982), writing that the all-embracing breadth of the infant’s “maternal relationship” is more inclusive of “living plants” and “unfiltered, unpolluted air.” The historian Theodore Roszak sought to access an “ecological unconscious” buried “at the core of the psyche, there to be drawn upon as a resource for restoring us to environmental harmony.” Murray Bookchin, the father of Marxist social ecology, denounced the Western valuation of “intellectual experience over sensuousness, the ‘reality principle’ over the ‘pleasure principle,’” over the course of forty years. More recently, posthumanist scholars such as Rosi Braidotti have gestured to a “vitalist...