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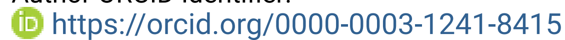
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WILD ABANDON:
POSTWAR LITERATURE BETWEEN ECOLOGY AND AUTHENTICITY

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By
Alexander Menrisky

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Michael Trask, Professor of English

Lexington, Kentucky

2018

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

WILD ABANDON:
POSTWAR LITERATURE BETWEEN ECOLOGY AND AUTHENTICITY

Wild Abandon traces a literary and cultural history of late twentieth-century appeals to dissolution, the moment at which a text seems to erase its subject's sense of selfhood in natural environs. I argue that such appeals arose in response to a prominent yet overlooked interaction between discourses of ecology and authenticity following the rise and fall of the American New Left in the 1960s and 70s. This conjunction inspired certain intellectuals and activists to celebrate the ecological concept of interconnectivity as the most authentic basis of subjectivity in political, philosophical, spiritual, and literary writings. As I argue, dissolution represents a universalist and essentialist impulse to reject self-identity in favor of an identification with the ecosystem writ large, a claim to authenticity that flattens distinctions among individuals and communities. But even as the self appears to disintegrate, an "I" always remains to testify to its disintegration. For this reason, dissolution performs a primarily critical function by foregrounding an unsurpassable representational tension between sense of self and ecosystem. Each chapter explores a different perspective on this tension as it conflicts with matters of gender and race in works by Edward Abbey, Peter Matthiessen, Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood, and Jon Krakauer. Assuming an anti-essentialist stance, all the texts I study acknowledge ecological interconnectivity as a universal condition but maintain the necessity of culturally mediated and individually constructed identity positions from which to recognize that condition.

KEYWORDS: American literature, postwar literature, ecology, environmentalism, counterculture, authenticity

Alexander Menrisky

13 April 2018
Date

WILD ABANDON:
POSTWAR LITERATURE BETWEEN ECOLOGY AND AUTHENTICITY

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Between Ecology and Authenticity

What does it mean to be a unique human individual? 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 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*

In a late chapter of *Desert Solitaire* (1968), Edward Abbey writes, "We need the possibility of escape as surely as we need hope; without it the life of the cities would drive all men into crime or drugs or psychoanalysis" (149). Elsewhere, he critiques "the Viennese quacks" who would suggest that defiance of authority "was in reality no more than the rebelliousness of an adolescent rejecting his father" (*Down* 31-2). We can read Abbey's words regarding psychoanalysis two ways: as suggesting that wilderness retreat negates the possibility of neurosis or psychosis, or that wilderness retreat itself serves as an alternative to psychoanalysis, a "walking cure" that presumably includes Abbey's own works, which he refers to as "antidotes to despair" (3). Twenty years later, in *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), Gary Snyder would write that "there is a problem with the self-seeking 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, both Eastern and Western" (*Practice* 92). Snyder projects an ecological and a psychoanalytic schema onto one another in this passage, aligning the ego with "civilization" and the unconscious with the wild aspects of "nature" as if taking his terms straight from Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). His understanding of each relationship (ego to unconscious, civilization to wilderness) determines and is determined by his interpretation of the other.

Abbey and Snyder are by no means the only ecologically minded writers to dip their toes into psychoanalysis. Murray Bookchin integrated psychoanalytic terminology into his eco-anarchist arguments over the course of forty years, lamenting the Western valuation of "intellectual experience over sensuousness, the 'reality principle' over the 'pleasure principle'" (7) in *The Ecology of Freedom* (1982). In the field of ecocriticism, William Howarth begins his opening chapter of *Reading the Earth* (1998) with a judgment on the state of ecology in both the natural sciences and environmental literary criticism, writing that both disciplines, at the time, appeared "[m]ore ego- than ecocentric . . . unlikely to build rapport with other disciplines" (3). The ego and the possibility—or impossibility—of its undoing have long been the concern of many an ecological writer.

Despite Abbey's disavowal, wilderness retreat narratives of the postwar era are entangled within a radical cultural context in which psychoanalysis experienced a surge in popularity beyond its institutional uses in social theory influential to the New Left. This branch of psychoanalytic thought forms merely one facet of a larger cultural discourse surrounding the celebration of and anxiety about both coherent and autonomous selfhood and its potential fabrication, evacuation, fragmentation, or dismissal. These concerns circulated throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s within the academy and around both radical and mainstream conversations about ecology and the environment.

In *Wild Abandon: Postwar Literature Between Ecology and Authenticity*, I argue that wilderness retreat narratives of the post-1945 era negotiate what they dramatize as a tension between coherent selfhood and ecological interconnectivity. Arising in the wake of New Left calls for liberation and the commitment to authenticity that became the cornerstone of countercultural politics, as well as the politics of the new social movements

that followed, this conflict manifests in moments during which a text seems to erase its characters' sense of selfhood in natural environs. These moments of dissolution are paradoxical experiences, requiring an "I" to testify to the erasure the self undergoes. Such passages, in which an individual professes to feel his or her selfhood melt into holistic harmony with the environment before selfhood re-coheres, are always ambivalent. They illustrate the oscillation central to the conflict these texts foreground between authentic selfhood and ecological interconnectivity as the New Left faded into the counterculture. *Wild Abandon*'s title gestures toward both the almost capricious rejection of self-identity foregrounded in these texts and the wilderness locale to which literary figures retreat in an attempt to conceptualize and identify with the complexity of the ecosystem writ large.

When I refer to authenticity, I mean an historically specific personal (and political) commitment to "a state of unity with the self" (Rossinow, *Politics* 4). As Michael Trask writes, if one Cold War liberal goal was to call the unity of self into question, then the New Left commitment was to "bring such a unity into being" (104). The notion of "unity" itself becomes troubling, however, for its inconsistency among various countercultural projects. Many radical ecological intellectuals have placed emphasis on "unity" in vastly disparate ways, from James Lovelock, who in 1975 broached the Gaia hypothesis to describe a holistic, "planet-sized entity" (10), to Bookchin, who proposed a utopian "ecological society" premised on what he refers to as primitive "organic societies" supplemented by modern technology (*Ecology* 3). For Bookchin, "it was the *unity* of my views—their ecological holism, not merely their individual components—that gave them a radical thrust."

My selected texts question the terms of unity in ecological discourse. Does unity signify the order of an authentic ego, or of an ecological system in which the self seems to lose a sustained sense of coherence? From its beginning, Roderick Nash writes, "ecology concerned communities, systems, wholes" (*Rights* 55). On the one hand, postwar commitments to authenticity and rights-of-nature discourse extending personhood to the nonhuman suggest the former. On the other, the countercultural fascination with the interconnectivity of ecology recalls what Freud calls the "oceanic feeling," a momentary dissolution of selfhood and sensation of holism. While many New Left and countercultural projects emblematize a commitment to personal fulfillment and autonomy, others—such as the 1960s drug experiments intended to facilitate "expanded consciousness"—aimed instead for a more unbounded psychic state.

Bookchin provided one radical voice among many calling for the reorganization of society on behalf of nature or in ecological or environmentalist terms. Herbert Marcuse claimed the "liberation of nature" would only be possible through the "coming revolution" against the rigidly capitalist economic and political traditions of American history (*Counterrevolution* 59). Marcuse's ideas, especially his call for a "great refusal" of the culture of waste in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), joined environmental with social concerns and resonated with the New Left, for whom social liberation was only possible alongside individual liberation. Marcuse's introduction of psychoanalysis to Marxist thought placed emphasis on the psyche rather than on economic systems, thus bolstering the authenticating project of the New Left. Marcuse's ideas are representative of the larger postwar preoccupation with the self, its consolidation, and its fragmentation, which manifested in a number of intellectual conversations, including sociology, dramaturgy,

social psychology, poststructuralist theory, and the antipsychiatry movement, among such diverse intellectual figures as David Reisman, Erving Goffman, Thomas Szasz, and R. D. Laing. Laing's contention that the "experience of oneself and others as persons is primary and self-validating" (*Divided Self* 22) made him a popular figure with the burgeoning New Left, whose leaders shared his conviction that "humanity is estranged from its authentic possibilities" within a social environment "alienated" from "a natural system" (*Politics* xiv, xv). Marcuse, on the other hand, did not frequently, if ever, use the term "authenticity," but the New Left and counterculture that drew inspiration from him, Laing, and others did. The New Left positioned authenticity against the artifice of technocratic, postindustrial consumer society, argued that contemporary civilization was "artificial," and voiced a "desire to make contact with 'real life,' to become 'real' or 'natural' or 'authentic'" (Rossinow, *Politics* 5).

Similar rhetorical appeals to "the natural," as well as anxieties regarding subjective cohesion, also circulated in postwar attention to ecology, which seeped into mainstream conversation over the course of the 1960s. In 1967 the ecologist Paul Shepard wrote that "ecology has become an *in* word" (891). Like "authenticity," "ecology" is a slippery term; its resonance fluctuates depending on the context of its use. It is perhaps most comprehensively defined by its basic premise: the interrelatedness of all organic and nonorganic matter. The human body, Shepard writes, is "ecologically like a pond surface or a forest soil, not a shell so much as a delicate interpenetration." ("Ecology and Man" 2). Ecology is a descriptive and experimental science, and despite the fact that its practitioners have never agreed upon its methodologies or conclusions, as a science it generally aims to empirically describe the world as it is, not to ideologically project the world as it should

be. As Shepard's recognition of the discipline's fashionableness illustrates, however, ecology is as much a culturally mediated notion as any other, and has been almost uniquely prone among the sciences to adoption by political concerns.

Wild Abandon considers the discursive tension that arises when ecology's presentation of what is natural dovetails with radical and identitarian appeals to the authentic. Claims regarding the essential underpinnings of ecological science—its discovery of natural, bare-bones human relations in the world—undermine the authentic individual at the point at which these discourses meet. The human body, considered ecologically, takes on a diminished role, even as its authenticity would appear elsewhere to swell to grandiose proportions. This suggestion underwrites Shepard's notable challenge to the disciplines of biology and psychology to "confront the ecological function of the unconscious" ("Whatever Happened" 894). In response to a colleague who worried that the concept of the ecosystem seemed to discount the individual, Shepard declared, "Individual man *has* his particular integrity, to be sure." And yet he encourages "ecological thinking," which "requires a kind of vision across boundaries. . . . It reveals the self ennobled and extended rather than threatened as part of the landscape and the ecosystem, because the beauty and complexity of nature are continuous with ourselves" ("Ecology and Man" 2). Despite Shepard's evocation of an "ennobled," grandiose self, his words illustrate that appeals to nature, authenticity, or essence might ultimately speak only to what is universal about individuals, their organic composition and subordination to the ecosystem.

The tension between solidity and fluidity that Shepard glosses is central to the wilderness retreat narratives of this study. Literary moments of dissolution represent attempts at such an expanded, ecological sense of identity. Throughout this dissertation I

examine these endeavors to identify with the ecosystem as a whole, a project that always fails. In *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey writes that while floating down the Colorado River on a raft with his friend Ralph Newcomb, “Configurations are beginning to fade, distinctions shading off into blended amalgams of man and man, men and water, water and rock” (209). Here Abbey is not, as critics of this sort of passage have argued, making a naïve claim that he has actually abandoned selfhood. This passage indicates a project of ecological identity that wavers and falls apart even as Abbey attempts to put words to it. Dissolution, as Timothy Morton writes in *Ecology without Nature* (2007), is an impossible, paradoxical project of achieving “ecology without a subject.” “The fragile ‘I’ addresses, or denies, this situation,” he writes. “*As I write . . . I am immersed in nature*. . . . Even if ‘I’ could be immersed in nature, and still exist as an *I*, there would remain the *I* who is telling you this, as opposed to the *I* who is immersed” (182). It seems unlikely that Abbey could write that “We are merging, molecules getting mixed” without recognizing that such an event was not taking place as he willfully put pen to paper. His words do not seem to take seriously the dissolution they report. Rather, they describe a friction between self and interconnective environment—an oscillation between ego and dispersal throughout an ecosystem, a lack of certainty where self begins and ends among sand, water, and air.

We ought to take this sort of passage as a critical reflection on the process it describes, rather than an instance of merely romantic self-inflation. Abbey’s text is certainly representative of what Ursula K. Heise has referred to as “individuals’ epiphanic fusions with their natural surroundings” in literary environmentalism between the 1950s and 70s, which “often put the emphasis on the (usually male) individual’s encounter with and physical immersion in the landscape, typically envisioned as wild rather than rural or

urban" (*Sense of Place* 29). Heise's critique is no doubt true for many writers—including Abbey. I argue, however, that this trope signals more nuanced work undertaken by writers such as Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood, and others. My analysis of these writers reveals that, far from merely engendering a simplistic and romantic discourse on the part of white men, the rhetoric of ecological ego-dissolution is multifaceted and critical, always examining and attempting to negotiate a conflict between ecology and nature, and authenticity and identity—a conceptual knot that Stacy Alaimo describes as an "uncomfortable and perplexing place where the 'human' is always already part of an active, often unpredictable, material world" (17).

Alaimo's *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010) is one of several texts at the forefront of a material turn in the environmental humanities, and joins a number of ecocritical studies preoccupied with ecological interconnectivity and the impact of "understanding the substance of one's self as interconnected with the wider environment," a recognition that "marks a profound shift in subjectivity" (20). Alaimo's notion of "trans-corporeality," which describes "the interconnections, interchanges, and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures" (2), presents ecology as a force disruptive of the Enlightenment inviolability of human subjectivity. While it is true that the very idea of interconnection "implies separateness and difference" (Morton, *Ecological Thought* 47), what Morton has termed the ecological "mesh" would nonetheless appear tight enough to have inspired some writers to take ecology as the delineation of identity, a transposition of descriptive science to ideology that has manifested in multiple venues from the 1960s to the present in a variety of ways. One observes a tendency to flatten the ecosystem into the totality of a holistic self in a multitude of postwar conversations,

including but not limited to nature writing, rights-of-nature legal scholarship, early ecofeminism, deep ecology, and even contemporary new materialist studies.

In the midst of the growing material turn in ecocriticism, which has explored the ways ecological science troubles a coherent understanding of the human, *Wild Abandon* sketches a literary history of the discourses and movements that have shaped how individuals imagine and experience identity in light of ecology. Throughout, I pay particular attention to various iterations of the broad (and by no means cohesive or monolithic) interest in authenticity and ecology of the past sixty years. This dissertation examines literary representations of the self in light of the material condition of ecological interconnectivity, rather than the material condition itself. How does the self grasp at its material implication in the ecosystem? How does one reconcile the material realities of the ecosystem with the socially contingent demands of identity? And how do writers represent this difficulty without holistically flattening others into the self? These are questions this dissertation's primary texts seek to address in myriad ways.

Ecology and identity, as concepts, philosophies, or modes of political being, do not easily mix. I do not mean to suggest that ecology and identity need stand as emblems of the longstanding dualism between "nature" and "culture." I need not argue, as countless scholars have convincingly done, that no clear line exists between the putatively distinct spheres of nature and culture. Social forms arise out of biological necessity, just as the material world plays a role in human societies, both as a matter of political interest and in part as a social construction itself. Humans are inextricably part of an ecosystem that exists regardless of its theorization. By the same token, the way human cultures think about the idea of the ecosystem changes depending on context. Ecology is as much a political

discourse as identity, and demonstrates, as Peter C. van Wyck puts it, "what we could call a discursive elasticity that allows it to be used to structure the world in any number of ways" (11). I am suggesting neither that objects exist only as humans imagine them, nor that human meaning is ultimately meaningless in the face of the material universe. I mean instead to announce a critical stance toward conceiving of the ecosystem as "nature," as a monolithic locale posited to exist entirely outside a cultural sphere, or even as something that operates more efficiently when as free of human influence as possible.

The writers to whom I dedicate the most attention share my skepticism to varying degrees; they write at a time when "ecology" often came to stand in for "nature," in both popular and academic contexts, to describe a distinct and desirable condition anterior to yet existing alongside modernity. What I want to suggest is that these writers illustrate that the more one naturalizes ecology toward political ends, or the more avidly one defines authentic identity chiefly in terms of materially interconnective nature, the less meaningful are words like "man," "woman," "black," and "white," and the less forceful claims made by individuals.[1] In other words, these writers are critical of a certain privilege granted to biological determinants in conceptions of identity, not only as a justification for racial or gendered oppression or exploitation, but also as an environmentalist attempt to establish identity with the natural world. Both politics of ecology and identity appeal to a rhetoric of authenticity, but ecology furthermore appears, for many writers, to also represent a universalizing impulse, an attempt to conceive of participation within an ecosystem as a holistic and expansive basis for authentic identity. It is undeniable that every human

[1] As van Wyck notes, deep ecology has a tendency to make of ecological principles "an epistemological shorthand to speak and conceive of humans as a single, unified category, the enormous reduction in complexity which results has very real and politically undesirable consequences: simply put, political, social, and cultural difference tends to disappear" (10).

creature is materially bound to the ecosystem in more or less the same way. Ecology, however, is a universalist discourse that ultimately cares absolutely nothing for individual lives. In fact, one might argue the individual is of more benefit to the ecosystem dead than alive—at that point, one's body pays it forward.

An unsurpassable representational tension occurs the moment at which an individual takes his or her identity to be defined primarily by the ecosystem itself—the moment at which the dissertation's titular discourses intersect. These moments are characterized chiefly by representations of dissolution in a wilderness context, where an idealized natural environment is taken for, assumed to be, or imagined as the conceptual site of an uninterrupted ecosystem. Dissolution represents the attempted projection of self-identity onto the ecosystem writ large, a dissemination across the network that attempts to conceive of identity *as* integration within the ecosystem, by which I mean the material fact that the human body takes part in interactions among organisms and transformations in matter over time. These attempts always fail—the brute materiality of the ecosystem is indifferent to identity claims. Despite this failure (or perhaps because of it), these imaginative acts of dissolution end up striving for what Morton calls the "ecological thought," the incongruous activity of reaching toward comprehension of the material complexity of ecological interconnectivity while nonetheless maintaining a distinction between "I" and other.

The texts examined throughout *Wild Abandon* ambivalently embrace and critique popular and philosophical appeals to ecology as the basis for ethics, politics, law, spirituality, and identity. They dramatize both the attempt at a solely ecological sense of identity and its failure, and explore the ramifications of concepts such as "ecology,"

"nature," "identity," and "authenticity" for various individuals and communities. In the following pages, I will detail the movements and commitments, and their contradictions, relevant to *Wild Abandon*'s historical context, beginning by examining the terms foregrounded in this dissertation's title, "ecology" and "authenticity." Throughout, I typically use the term "environment" to refer to a monolithic representation of the natural world; "environmentalism" to describe any politics of protection, advocacy, justice, authenticity, and/or rights including or extended to the nonhuman; and "ecology" to describe an interpenetrative natural system.

"The Subversive Science"

Ecologists have never shared a cohesive understanding of their subject. The ideas of "ecology" and the "ecosystem" have undergone several major transformations since their nominalization, respectively, by Ernst Haeckel in 1866 and Arthur Tansley several years later (Golley 1-2). Frank Golley suggests that the most important factor in the discipline's growth in the United States was the Second World War, after which American prosperity allowed the country to pursue ecosystem research in ways other nations, preoccupied with reconstruction, could not. Ecological research, in this period, resembled "machine theory applied to nature." The U. S. Atomic Energy Commission initially funded major projects to study the baseline ecological impact of nuclear weapons and later energy facilities (Golley 2-3). In the 1960s this approach began to give way to large-scale studies based on systems models (138).[2] As Golley notes, "Environmentalists seized upon the ecosystem concept as a way to maintain their faith in holism. . . . The issue was a moral one" (3).

[2] During this period, evolutionary ecology presented a challenge to holistic ecosystem ecology, engendering a tension between the study of wholes and the study of individuals and species (Golley 5). This conflict reveals a tension in dominant academic scientific models between the individual and the whole, which plays out during this same period in the arts and humanities.

Ecological science became so influential, Donald Worster writes, "that our time might well be called the 'Age of Ecology'" (vii), the "truly unique feature" of which, he suggests, "was its sense of nature as a defenseless victim" (341). Its "'oppressor'" included not only the capitalist economic system, but also "the larger set of values associated with the long rise of a bourgeois civilization," especially "unlimited production and consumption" (342).

Ecological science became widely publicized especially following the release of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), in which Carson "recognized that the environmental crisis could not be adequately understood in terms of the bifurcated semantics of nature as it had prevailed since the eighteenth century" (Bergthaller 11). Early in *Silent Spring*, Carson makes the claim that the "central problem of our age has . . . become contamination of man's total environment with substances of incredible potential for harm" (8). These words not only delineate what Carson sees as the stakes of her research, but set the stage for a narrative of poisonous cross-pollination that implicates *Homo sapiens* and lends the interpenetrative notion of ecology a dangerous dimension that would bring that science to the forefront of American concern in the early 1960s. If for environmental philosophers, preservationists, and conservationists of previous generations the wilderness, the wild, or "nature" had been conceptually cordoned from the civilized and industrialized, Carson made forcefully clear that such an imagined barrier had always been porous. The most bracing aspect of Carson's exposé was not the announcement that pesticides might threaten the natural world, but her assertion that these chemicals are equally harmful, when aerosolized, in the city, the suburb, and the home, and reach consumers through a variety of natural pathways, through food, water, and air.

Recognition of these wide-ranging effects first spread in reaction not to insecticides but to radioactive fallout from aboveground nuclear testing (Hays 58). These concerns disrupted what Ramachandra Guha calls the "age of ecological innocence," the postwar period during which economic constraints for ecological reasons were popularly considered irrelevant at best and politically undesirable and unpatriotic—dangerous for national image and industrial and population growth amidst Cold War-era competition—at worst (66). This Cold War narrative met pushback in a rash of publications, *Silent Spring* among them, about pollutants, population, and shared land. Garrett Hardin published his influential theory of the tragedy of the commons in 1967, presenting an argument for the public nature of environmental impact on the one hand, and the unsustainability of a growing and increasingly affluent population on the other. Four years later, Barry Commoner published *The Closing Circle* (1971), an account of ecological disruption that had "broken out of the circle of life," which provided specific examples of polluted conditions in various US cities (8). Events such as the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill hastened middle-class American concern over the dangers of environmental catastrophe, and mainstream groups began to organize around issues regarding pollution and toxic waste. Multiple apocalyptic sustainability studies went to print, such as Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968), which linked exponential human population growth to ecological degradation and foregrounded the earth's incapacity to sustain such numbers. The increasing cacophony of voices crying population-induced doomsday led to numerous institutional and policy measures intended to curb population growth. The thinly veiled racism of many of these measures led radical students groups and publications, such as *Ramparts*, *Rat*, and *The Old Mole*, to denounce the population angle "for its politically

objectionable aspects," especially sterilization programs, which came to be denounced as a form of genocide, "an agenda for containment" (Gottlieb 97). These voices chiefly organized around the New Left student political movement of the 1960s, which sought to distance itself from scientific circles of environmental activism and the "environmentalist" label itself—refusals that illustrate the students' fraught relationship with environmentalism, despite the latter, more permanent movement's debt to New Left strategies of organization.

If New Left activists were generally wary of early mainstream environmentalism, many others embraced its implications. As ecology, a descriptive model of the world, popularized, humanist writers, from radical intellectuals to contemporary ecocritics, increasingly framed ecology as a "subversive science," given its overtones of "genuine *intermingling*," what many have interpreted as refutation of subject-object hierarchy (Evernden 93). Theodore Roszak declared environmentalism a subversive movement for what he perceived as its aim toward the "disintegration" of contemporary society (*Person/Planet* xix). Worster retrospectively praised Henry David Thoreau, who "could . . . feel himself extended beyond the limits of his individual lump of matter . . . engorging nature into the self as well as merging the self in nature" (78-9), for his "Romantic ecology," a literary concern "with relation, interdependence, and holism" (58). Ecological science similarly impacted sociological and psychological scholarship. Child psychologist Edith Cobb, for example, postulated an innate relationship between children and the natural world, an ambivalent, "unmediated vision" that is a child's blurred, "intuitive sense of a perceptual continuity with nature," the source of human imagination, which she describes as "a living ecological relationship between an observer and an environment, a person and

a place" (123). Writers and scholars such as these turned the foundations of ecological science to psychological, ethical, and existential concerns that contributed to the discursive tension at the heart of this dissertation's critique.

The Authentic Ego

In 1962, the mostly white and affluent Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) penned the *Port Huron Statement*, which set forth two principal platforms—racial integration and nuclear disarmament—and ended with a call to radical reformism, a percussive list detailing what "a new left must be" (171-2). What came to be called the Movement, together with more loosely organized countercultural unrest, denounced both the rampant anticommunism of the previous decade and the liberal establishment it viewed as perpetuating a repressive culture, and yet also approached the Marxism and socialism of previous generations ambivalently (Rossinow, *Visions* 2).

An emphasis on individual liberation and what Doug Rossinow calls a "politics of authenticity" became the cornerstone of New Left politics, as the concept of liberation expanded beyond economics and class, and consequently all quotidian and personal matters became, for the New Left and subsequent movements, political. In 1962 Gabriel Breton wrote in *New University Thought* that "what is for us the ultimate and most irreducible value . . . is the person, the human being—not aspects, or parts or capacities of the human being, not systems or institutions . . . but the person, in his totality, in his freedom, in his originality and in his essential dignity." The *Port Huron Statement* begins with the declaration that the "goal of man and society should be . . . finding a meaning in life that is personally authentic" (167); according to New Left thought, the chief value of political marginality lay in its connotation of radical agency and the perception that

marginal groups "seemed culturally authentic" (Rossinow, *Politics* 15). As Rossinow writes, an "opposition between the natural, or the 'real,' and the artificial most directly expressed the existentialist search for authenticity, forming a kind of preface to any discussion of specific practices and values that ought to change" (*Politics* 250). The notion of natural selfhood—and by extension natural, democratic governance—opposed what radicals viewed as the artificiality of a rigged party system in stalemate and the circulation of corporate interests.

"Authenticity" remains an opaque term at best, however. As James Miller points out, the word is poorly defined in the *Port Huron Statement* (205).[3] The draftsman of the *Statement* and editor of *The Michigan Daily* Tom Hayden described authenticity as "genuine independence" and "an intuitive alertness to that which is capable of occurring, to that which is not yet realized, and a passion for the continuous opening of human potential" in a speech on "Student Social Action" delivered in Ann Arbor in 1962. Yet if the term itself never gathered enough clout for clear definition, the sense of authenticity as "exalting the flux of experience and simultaneously underlining the importance of a lucid sense of conscience" (Miller 205) remained the defining characteristic of personal values within the New Left.

This sense of authenticity—ill-defined, vaguely individualistic, yet also welded to notions of cooperation and ethical governance—reflects the psychoanalytical thrust of the theory of libertarian socialism developed by Frankfurt School alum and New Left guru

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[3] According to Miller, the New Left project of authenticity began with the "Cleveland project," an experiment in participatory democracy through open-ended discussions that allowed "each member to participate in virtually every decision that affected his or her life" (205). And yet one of the project's members, Sharon Jeffrey, recalls that few SDS members were willing to openly discuss authenticity, and some rejected the project as "touchy-feely."

Marcuse. This influence is especially prominent in light of the New Left's dual commitment to personal authentication and social revolution, which Marcuse refers to as the ontogenetic and phylogenetic transformations of repressive civilization. Marcuse became "a kind of underground intellectual hero to New Left activists" (Gottlieb 91) especially for his contention that the domination of nature is fundamentally linked to the domination of humankind. Capitalism "reduce[s] both nature and people to raw materials with strictly utilitarian value" (Nash, *Rights* 166).[4] While his previous works initially went relatively unrecognized by American audiences, the popularity of *One-Dimensional Man* among student radicals increased attention to his earlier social theory. If *Eros and Civilization* (1955) anticipated the libertarian-socialist impulses of the 1960s, *One-Dimensional Man* intersected with their apparent manifestation. The book's popularity, and Marcuse's own notoriety, resulted from his increasing concretizing, in terms and examples that resonated with the New Left, of his earlier psychoanalytic abstractions.

Marcuse belongs to a loose collection of social theorists writing in the 1950s and 60s, including Wilhelm Reich, Géza Roheim, and Norman O. Brown, which Paul A. Robinson refers to collectively as the Freudian Left.[5] Chief among these social theorists' concerns was a dialectical negotiation of psychic and social reality. Marcuse develops what he calls, in the Marxist Humanist tradition, a communistic individualism, leaving behind concern with socialization of the means of production to focus on the subordination of

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[4] This position is predictive of contemporary ecofeminist and environmental justice arguments, and representative of New Left environmentalism. Bookchin similarly argues that "the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human" (*Ecology* 1).

[5] For Roszak, who helped popularize the term "counterculture," the Movement "begins where Marcuse pulls up short, and where Brown, with no apologies, goes off the deep end" (*Making* 88). Marcuse's position, in the long run, is more cautious than Brown's, and less excessive; Roszak's words might be said to illustrate some key points at which the New Left and counterculture diverge, namely philosophical differences between a focus on alienation versus lifestyle change, on confrontation versus withdrawal.

technology to the free realization of each individual by each individual. Unlike Marx, Marcuse speaks of liberation in terms of pleasure, Eros, and self-fulfillment, and defines "alienation" as a psychological phenomenon that social life intensifies. These emphases on consciousness, fulfillment, and alienation within the self and from the culture at large resonated with the New Left. The *Port Huron Statement* echoes the precept of self-fulfillment: "Men have unrealized potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity. . . . This kind of independence does not mean egoistic individualism—the object is not to have one's way so much as it is to have a way that is one's own" (166-7). *One-Dimensional Man* especially influenced student radicals in that its "great refusal" encompassed the protest of groups who rejected or were unable to share in the "coercive consumerism" of late capitalism (Breines xv).

Eros and Civilization outlined a utopian society based on psychoanalytic principles, revising and combining Marxism and *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in which Freud argues that the individual sacrifices the boundless pleasure and satisfaction of infantile narcissism for the realities of ego development and the protections of organized civilization. The price of civilization is diminishment, as "[t]he feeling of happiness derived from the satisfaction of a wild instinctual impulse untamed by the ego is incomparably more intense than that derived from sating an instinct that has been tamed" (Freud, *Civilization* 48). The ego, he writes, is "only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive—indeed, an all-embracing—feeling which corresponds to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it" (29), which is diminished as the individual enters into social relations. Marcuse revises Freud's argument that individuals, in always accepting the limitations of the civilized ego, are doomed to a repressive existence. His

Marxist examination of psychoanalysis leads him to conclude that the "reality principle" of the ego is historically, not biologically, generated. The problem is not that humans are repressed, but that they are repressed too much. A certain amount of repression is necessary for the survival of humankind and civilization, but this repression, freed from the oppressive conditions of postindustrial society, would manifest to a far more limited extent for both the individual and civilization as a whole. Marcuse's revolutionary mandate is to ease that repression on both levels through intertwined attention to social and self-liberation, a project Yippie leader Jerry Rubin sloganized as "Revolution only comes through personal transformation" (42). By changing institutions, Marcuse argues, we change the structure of the psyche. "The opposition between man and nature, subject and object, is overcome," and the individual, organized by a newly minimally repressed ego, experiences greater gratification and self-fulfillment, on his or her own terms and according to his or her own pleasure: "Being is experienced as gratification, which unites man and nature" (*Eros* 166).

I draw attention to Marcuse's work because his influence clarifies the degree to which "authenticity" in New Left and countercultural rhetoric overlaps with discussion regarding the ego in a number of venues in postwar American psychology and radical philosophy. If the New Left never succeeded in defining "authenticity" in its founding documents, the Movement's Marcusan influence suggests a marked interest, in less certain terms, of a redefined reality principle, an unrepressed ego. To champion authenticity is in one sense to celebrate the ego, a cohesive sense of selfhood that *can be fulfilled*.

And yet Marcuse's theory carries within it a tension that destabilizes this authentic ego. Much as Marcuse's contemporaries in other fields questioned the cohesive autonomy

of the self, psychoanalysis, by virtue even of the mere definition of the unconscious, undermines any solidly individualist platform. And Marcuse's writing emphasizes an uncertain coexistence of ego and narcissistic non-ego beneath it, of the conscious and unconscious, of the reality and pleasure principles. The vague border between pleasure and reality in Freud and later Marcuse demands the clarification of a liberatory politics based on a fine line between oceanic states of pleasure and cosmic unity on the one hand, or self-actualizing ego-fulfillment on the other. The argument that a less repressed ego—that is, an ego that relaxes its relationship to the unconscious—functions more naturally than an ego hogtied by civilization implies, by extension, that the *most* authentic ego would be no ego at all. A telling illustration of this difficulty arises in Marcuse's own environmentalist writing. In his 1972 lecture "Ecology and Revolution," he writes that nature is "a dimension *beyond* labor, a symbol of beauty, of tranquility, of a non-repressive order" and that "nature is the source and locus of the life instincts which struggle against the instincts of aggression and destruction" (174). Despite the fact that Marcuse's Freudian Marxism proposes a "liberated" ego, this lecture unites ecology with the illusive holism of the pleasure principle. Marcuse grapples with the difficulty of placing ecology—something he himself aligns with the dispersed satisfactions and interconnective implications of the pleasure principle—on a level with the ego within his own logic.

Politics of Ecological Consciousness

New Left politics, Robert Gottlieb writes, came to associate early radical environmentalism with "the search for alternative institutions and a new way of living" (97), an idea Chapter 2 will explore in more depth. "Technological progress" came to be associated with conditions simultaneously oppressive to freedom, labor, and health. These "quality-of-life"

issues, brought to the forefront of radical consciousness by events such as the 1965 power blackout and garbage strikes in New York City, the 1969 burning of the Ohio River, and the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill, came to be intimately tied to questions of ecological health, especially after the publication of *Silent Spring*. The potential harm of DDT outlined by Carson was put into even greater and more urgent relief by its demonstrated and soon publicized effects on chemical plant workers (Hays 56). Students later expanded anti-chemical commitments in protests against the "ecocide" of the Vietnam War. The grassroots anti-toxics movement of the late 1970s, which "came to understand discrete toxic assaults as part of an economic structure in which, as part of the 'natural' functioning of the economy, certain communities would be polluted" (Cole and Foster 23), grew out of these concerns, and provided an alternative to the insider litigation of mainstream environmentalism following Earth Day 1970, after the New Left itself had dissipated.[6]

Quality of life, health, and the proposal of alternative, unoppressive structures came to be bound together for the New Left. Environmental politics was largely inseparable from a larger liberatory politics aimed against contemporary industrial and postindustrial capitalism.[7] The 1969 People's Park in Berkeley, which aimed to secure green student

[6] The anti-toxics movement would eventually transform under the influence of civil rights racial critique to emerge, sporadically, as the coalitional Environmental Justice Movement in the 1980s, whose formation, as Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster put it, forged networks that "transform[ed] the possibilities for fundamental social and environmental change through redefinition, reinvention, and construction of innovative political and cultural discourses and practices" (14). The environmental justice movement has been the most concrete locus of criticism against mainstream environmentalism, as well as the sort of romantic wilderness rhetoric driving the "flattening" of self into other that characterizes the sincerer professions of dissolution discussed in these pages.

[7] In an issue of *Liberation*, environmentalist Barry Weisberg wrote that the "deterioration of the natural environment all around us" is "clearly a product of the nature of production and consumption, of cultural values and social relationships that today hold sway over industrial technological society." Ecology is crucial to political opposition, he writes, due to "the realization that politics in our age has developed an absolute character. . . . the land we walk upon, the air we breathe, and the water we drink, are now the subject of political management" (154). This passage reflects how New Left calls for environmental reform established themselves on the presumption that political life equaled quotidian life—that systemic oppression reached all entities and therefore rendered them matters of political import.

space over the construction of a new parking lot and against which then-California governor Ronald Reagan mobilized the National Guard, seemed to herald the kind of alternative, direct-action social order the New Left foresaw. Roszak, reflecting on the event, writes, “What the Human Be-In in San Francisco had been for one day, what the Woodstock Festival in upstate New York in early 1969 had been for a weekend, People’s Park was meant to be for keeps” (*Satori* 6). But the protests, and others like them, did not manifest as large-scale political transformation or cultural revolution, but increasingly in spurts of confrontation and violence. In *The Sixties* (1987), Todd Gitlin describes “the no-longer-new Left” beset by “growing militancy, growing isolation, growing commitment to The Revolution, sloppier and more frantic attempts to imagine a revolutionary class, growing hatred among the competing factions with their competing imaginations” (380). These conflicts circled around Vietnam protest “in a seamless loop,” as some factions grew increasingly militant and others joined liberal nonradicals focused on cultural liberalization.

The counterculture offered ecological alternatives, but these focused largely on “turning inward toward alternative forms” (Gottlieb 103). The first Earth Day in 1970 became a major turning point between the overlapping choices of revolution or lifestyle. Many activists feared the event would deflect focus from environmental radicalism and critique of cultural values and consumerism toward individual lifestyle and purchasing choices (Gottlieb 107). At the same time, the younger generation “became concerned not just about pollution and human welfare, but with understanding and preserving ecosystems” (Schulman 89), and broadened environmentalism in new and ultimately marginal directions. Political philosophers such as Christopher Stone, Richard Ryder, and

Richard and Val Routley worked to expand the definition of natural rights to encompass nonhuman organisms and even ecosystems as a whole, a project that injected ecological discourse into postwar liberal philosophy in often messy and contradictory ways that will be considered in Chapter 3. The years between 1969 and 1972 also saw the inception of multiple environmental organizations, including the campaign groups Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, and the Natural Resources Defense Council. Abbey's 1975 novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* inspired the guerilla Earth First! network of eco-saboteurs.

Abbey's call to arms is reflective of the anarchism of his era, which Bookchin most lastingly put into ecological terms in a series of anarchist-communitarian tracts. In *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (1970), Bookchin argues for a radical ecology recognizing that improved human relationships with the natural world rely on improved social conditions for human populations. Capitalism, Bookchin writes, is "inherently anti-ecological" (*Anarchism* 16). Like Marcuse, Bookchin sees ecological issues as social issues; the "generalized revolution" involves liberation of the environment as well as mankind.[8] Socialism, he writes, tends to organize into "hierarchical bodies"; at one point he describes Leftists as "authoritarian," lumping them with liberals and rightists as opponents to anarchism (69). "Hierarchy, sexism and renunciation do not disappear with 'democratic centralism,' a 'revolutionary leadership,' a 'worker's state,' and a 'planned economy,'" Bookchin writes, and on the contrary "function all the more effectively if centralism appears to be 'democratic'" and "if leaders appear to be 'revolutionaries'" (13). Bookchin

[8] At the same time, however, technological advancement produces the possibility of bringing land and city into a "rational and ecological synthesis" (*Limits* 3). The material privilege and waste of resources that characterize modern capitalism do not, Bookchin writes, form the content of the post-scarcity society. Rather, the technology that produces such abundance must be turned to the task of providing a material basis for liberation.

voices a critique frequently leveled against the New Left: that its leadership, white and male as it mostly was, contributed to a perpetuation of the very injustices it claimed to dispel, a shortcoming explored in terms of feminist backlash in Chapter 4. In response, Bookchin defines anarchism, or anarcho-communism, as "a stateless, classless, decentralized society in which the splits created by the propertied society are transcended by new, unalienated human relationships" (18). The anarchist alternative lays the foundation for an "organic society" in which community is defined by kinship and common interest, and "transcends the traditional split between psyche and the social world" (20).

Bookchin views ecology as "uniquely liberatory" for its challenge to hierarchy, and much like Marcuse he calls for the cooperative elimination of social and psychic alienation: "the removal of repression in society must take place concurrently with the removal of repression in the human psyche. Accordingly, there can be no hope of liberating society without self-liberation in the fullest meaning of selfhood, of the ego and all its claims" (331). In Bookchin and other writers, the terms of ecology tend to slide into an indistinct definition of unity and holism that defy his own authenticating rhetoric of individual liberation.

This slippage results from Bookchin's engagement with an unclear psychoanalytic rhetoric, a shaky position regarding the implication, definition, and role of the ego in self-fulfillment. The indistinct meaning of the word "of" in the phrase "of the ego" causes difficulty in the passage above. Does Bookchin mean liberation *for* the ego or *from* the ego? The addition of "and all its claims" suggests the latter. His argument does not quite make clear his intention, here or throughout his oeuvre, and suggests a confusion that, while not necessarily nullifying his insistence on "unity in diversity," calls into question the

strength of a distinction he tries to make between social ecology and "nirvana." The notion of ecological interplay among the human and nonhuman begins to collapse the idea of a fixed, autonomous, and authentic subject (which the protected environment of environmental rights discourse also resembles) evoked by the New Left claim that individuals and the environment are oppressed in like kind.

All the same, Bookchin became a patron intellectual saint of the communards who embodied Roszak's observation that countercultural style "purported to be 'natural,' 'organic,' a principled rejection of the antiseptic, upwardly-mobile middle-class habits in favor of a return to folk origins and lost traditions" (*Satori* 3). As New Left activism faded, back-to-the-land movements and rural communities grew in popularity. Communes offered a change of consciousness and alternative social organization that did not require revolution: "By opting out of the mainstream in the production of the most basic necessities of life, communards were constructing an alternative, do-it-yourself America," Bruce Schulman writes (90). While these practices "helped reaffirm the notion that environmentalism was also about constructing alternatives" (Gottlieb 99), they also focused more on individual lifestyle choices rather than largescale social restructuring.[9] Those at Morning Star Ranch in Marin County, California, developed a "voluntary primitivism"; participants at People's Park referred to themselves as aboriginal "sod brothers"; and young people at rural communes across the country emulated "romantic versions of Native American tribal culture" (Schulman 90).

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[9] The back-to-the-land movement persists in bioregional movements and reinhabitation, which emerged in the 1970s following thinkers like Snyder, Peter Berg, and Stephanie Mills. These later movements, still in force today, posit the land in which the individual finds oneself as an integrated component of identity, rather than its sole basis: "By foregrounding natural factors as a way to envision place, bioregionalism proposes that human identity may be constituted by our residence in a larger community of natural beings—our local bioregion—rather than, or at least supplementary to, national, state, ethnic, or other more common bases of identity" (Lynch et al. 4).

The environmentalist thrust behind these movements also found inspiration in East Asian spirituality, especially Zen Buddhism, and adherents turned to gurus such as Snyder, Paul Goodman, and Alan Watts, as well as to literary movements represented by figures like the beats. Watts argued that the individual human "is not a skin encapsulated ego but an organism-environment field" ("Individual" 140). He describes the organism as "a point at which the field is 'focused,'" a locus of that field's expression, the unique distillation of the universe's energy. Watts criticizes what he views as the infinite breakdown of biological nominalism, writing that "man, as a complex of organs, is not an *addition* of parts, like an automobile. His various organs are not to be treated as if they were assembled together, but by seeing the physical body as a unified or integrated pattern of behavior" (143). This notion, when enlarged—taking the "field" to be the greater unification he clearly understands it to be, and locating man in the role of organ, cell, or neuron—betrays a tension within Watts' logic as well. He spiritualizes the individual as a locus of universal energy, creativity, and gratification, exalting a sense of unity in body *and* universe. Watts does not reconcile the two spheres he has set forth as possessing ultimate value, with the result that holism appears to ultimately eclipse the individual. The best Watts can do with this difficulty is to say that the human individual becomes "a reciprocal interaction between everything inside the skin and everything outside it" (148).

The general ecological attitude shared by Watts and Bookchin is indicative of an intellectual climate inclusive of both mainstream and radical science and philosophy that was fascinated by systems and connectivity in the 1960s and 70s, including the intertwined disciplines of social ecology and cybernetics that circulated in work by writers such as

Hardin and Norbert Wiener.[10] In his counterculture retrospective "From Satori to Silicon Valley" (1986), Roszak suggests that the National Book Award winning *Whole Earth Catalog* (1968) helped to further disseminate an interest in ecology-as-cybernetics, in the natural world as an interlinking, interpenetrative system.[11] The *Catalog*, like Earth Day two years later, represented a major shift in environmentalist politics toward consumer savvy, placing emphasis on "technologically enthusiastic environmental pragmatism," a reconciliation of consumption with ecology (Kirk 9). The series' founder, Stewart Brand, was unapologetic for what many took to be his aggressively conservative "enthusiasm for business and unfettered capitalism" (187). At the same time, however, he sought much of his inspiration for the *Catalog* in countercultural mainstays such as Native American culture and spirituality, as well as the highly publicized drug experiments in "consciousness expansion" pursued by figures such as Timothy Leary and Ram Dass. For Brand, these practices were intimately tied to ecological consciousness, the experience of which could be achieved by way of mindfulness and psychotropics, which many believed inspired "feelings of unity with the universe" (Elcock 299). Brand's friendship with Ken Kesey introduced him to the latter's famous acid tests, experiments intended to produce such an expansion of self, communal experience, and achievement of unity. These adventures were representative of a youth culture unclear about its mission, whether that was for the liberation of oppressed individuals, for highly connective new communities that would solder individuals together at the seams of their very consciousness, or for some elusive combination of both.

[10] Before "The Tragedy of the Commons," Hardin wrote "The Cybernetics of Competition" in 1963, characterizing ecological systems with positive and negative feedback as functions of population.
[11] The *Catalog*, Roszak suggests, predicted the technotopia of Silicon Valley: the hippies and beatniks of the 1960s, interested in cybernetics as well as organics, became the hackers and code-writers of the 1980s.

Narratives of Wilderness Retreat

These movements, philosophies, and conversations circulating throughout the 1960s and 70s provide the foundation for a clash between authentic conceptions of selfhood and the principles of ecological science, often taken for moral and political truth, in literature of the late twentieth century. The tension between selfhood and system persisted in ecological philosophy throughout the 1980s and into the 90s, especially among deep ecologists pitting themselves against the "shallow" ecology of the mainstream environmental movement, as well as in efforts by rights activists to integrate nonhuman organisms into the liberal state (two movements that Chapters 5 and 3 will consider, respectively). In response to this discursive climate of ontological uncertainty, literary writing about ecology becomes a meditation on the stability of the self in an ecosystem in which it becomes more and more difficult to determine where the self begins and the interdependent system ends (if it even does). This theme plays out in a capacious swath of postwar texts in a variety of ways, and the following chapters explore various perspectives on this tension, in a necessarily limited number of examples, across lines of race, class, and gender. *Wild Abandon* focuses chiefly on Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* (1978), Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1978), Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972), and Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (1996), all of which I characterize here as narratives of retreat.

Randall Roorda, in *Dramas of Solitude* (1998), defines retreat as nature writing's "central dynamic," the writer's "movement from human society toward a state of solitude in nature" (xiii). Works of fiction might productively be classified as "narratives of retreat" just as convincingly (or classify themselves just as forcefully) as a memoir, journal, or travelogue. Even if narratives of retreat are "stories of movement from human to nonhuman

spheres," the helpfully expansive label signifies a number of genres typically removed from—even if historically canonized over—nature writing (101). In other words, I read all of these texts as narratives of retreat because retreat is, in every case, central to my interpretation. Roorda also notes of Wendell Berry that retreat is frequently "predicated on ethics, on a sense of community relations" (xvi). We might productively refer to this movement as one out of an anthrosphere and into a biosphere—a distinction less between "nature" and "culture" or "wilderness" and "civilization," but between certain modes of perception and consciousness. "Nature" cannot merely be considered a "form of refuge—for biological diversity, endangered species, and equally endangered forms of sensual, aesthetic, and spiritual life, all threatened by an increasingly destructive and all-pervasive world economic and social order" (Hess 85). It is all well and good to dismiss retreat as "Romantic imaginative escapism and autonomous individualism that in many ways actually supports the same modern consumer order that it claims to oppose" (85). But historical evidence seems to suggest that both assertions—retreat is desirable, retreat is naïve—take for granted that nature is only ever considered a place of solitude. Many works of scholarship, including the one just quoted, make the case "for redefining 'nature' to include also the everyday" (85). I begin Chapter 2 by making an inverse argument: because "nature" is always at some level determined by human meaning, the postwar era introduces a series of formulations by which "nature" is posed as an alternative civilization.

Furthermore, *Wild Abandon* contends that a psychic dimension to this landscape is present in its primary texts listed above. Judith Paltin notes that, in the past, "nature—in this case, defined as the external reality—has been posited as the ground of mimesis; aesthetic realism characterizes the artwork as a meaningful reproduction of external being,

and founds its dynamism on a protagonist's exchanges within a more or less autonomous ecosystem" (778). Even in terms of this mimetic imperative, emphasis lies on the protagonist and his or her sense of experience or relation. Thoreau's sublime and threatening experience upon Ktaadn is, after all, a matter entirely of his perception—and it is worth noting that this climax, as Roorda remarks, is not as upsetting to Thoreau as commentators have frequently described: "we should not overlook how thrilling is the experience of nature's extremity as Thoreau depicts it, with what manifest enthusiasm he deploys a rhetoric of threat . . . of the sublime that, in Burkean form, is ever a function of terror and thrill" (55). For Roorda, this sort of moment, which he views as part and parcel of the retreat narrative, is essentially textual, limited to its representation, even as it "reflects an ascetic impulse . . . to self-sacrifice, in terms of which dissolution of personal identity is an attraction, consonant with recognition of the nonhuman."

If romanticism represents an oscillation between mimesis and the drive for transcendence, and modernism a critique of this ambivalent yearning, a "hope to assimilate the world in a new form of encounter—not mimetic and not transcendent—to achieve some solid footing on the earth" (Paltin 779), then my selected texts demonstrate that the retreat narrative of the postwar era is far more concerned with the self itself, as selfhood is implicated, sustained, or threatened within the conditions of ecological interconnectivity. As Roorda's observation above indicates, this concern is not particular to the twentieth century, and finds roots at least as early as the heyday of transcendentalism before experiencing reinvigorated expression and more sharply political import after the introduction of ecology to mainstream discourse. Despite the material basis of what might

be called this ecological anxiety, this crisis is largely an existentialist one, which arises out of the specific collection of sociocultural discourses discussed above.

The trope of dissolution itself signals a kind of reinvigorated romanticism in the wake of ecology's revelations, in both its attempted expression of spontaneous sincerity and authenticity, and its unpleasant flavor of expansive, egoistic self-projection. But the ambivalence with which my selected writers approach the idea signals a marked distrust of their subject matter, a refutation of the romantic notion that in nature lies the authentic self, and a critical examination of the ideas of "nature" and "wilderness" in general. Hannes Bergthaller writes that "[i]t is not just a historical coincidence" that the disciplines of ecocriticism and environmental history both "avoided the word 'nature' in their respective self-designations" even as they "successfully put nature back on the agenda of the humanities" (9-10). The omission, he writes, recognizes that "nature" is "a concept too fraught with dubious historical associations, too incoherent, too slippery, and too intransigent to provide a sound footing for good scholarship." On the one hand, this shift in terminology is indicative of a larger scientific and cultural interest in ecology, already erupting onto both the mainstream and radical political scenes at the time of these writers' publication. On the other hand, Bergthaller's words reveal exactly why "nature" remains, to an extent, a useful term. Like "wilderness," it has been used historically in different ways to mean different things.[12] Both "nature" and "wilderness," for the texts I examine, come to stand in for ecological systems themselves, or to designate a locale for their uninterrupted procedure.

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[12] Heise advises that ecocriticism should "analyz[e] the ways in which literature represents the human relation to nature and particular moments of history, what values are assigned to nature and why, and how perceptions of the natural shape literary tropes and genres" ("Hitchhiker's Guide" 1097).

In this dissertation's selected texts, "wilderness" comes to signify not merely pastoral flight nor bourgeois preservationism—though these elements are certainly at times present—but a conceptual space in which ecological interconnectivity is more approachable, or more fully visualized or experienced. This method of siting ecology as wilderness shares much in common with the philosophy of deep ecology—or it would, if these texts did not consistently problematize the attempted definition of identity in terms of holistic ecology. This space by no means excludes the experience of ecological forces in urban environs, as Lawrence Buell has demonstrated with his study of the turn-of-the-century *flâneur* in *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001, 84ff.) and a considerable number of environmental justice scholars have contended regarding relationships among class, race, and environment in the city. Rather than the transcendentalism of romanticism or the probing irony and reflective distance of modernism, these texts foreground their ambivalence—specifically, an ambivalence between the coherent selfhood of an authentic ego, and what comes to be represented as the dispersed and indistinct identity of one who recognizes no clear beginning or end to selfhood within an ecosystem.

Chapter 2 explores this tension in the context of New Left calls for alternative models of social organization. I argue that in *Desert Solitaire* Abbey presents his desert ecosystem itself as an alternative civilization, an equation that results in the conflict *Wild Abandon* examines. Once Abbey conceives of civilization as ecology, the very notion of selfhood begins to collapse. Abbey's edict to "feel like a river" is a call to imaginatively grasp his place within his ecosystem civilization by attempting to embody or identify with the system itself. But both Abbey and Matthiessen, whom this chapter also examines, are concerned with individual selfhood and authenticity. They view themselves as autonomous

"citizens" of the ecosystem, and as such, despite their attempts to merge their identities with the entire system, their sense of selfhood—a "useful fiction," according to Watts—persists. But *Desert Solitaire* and *The Snow Leopard* illustrate that if the ego is a "useful fiction," so too is its dissolution, in that such a fantasy allows the individual to more fully acknowledge his or her implication within an ecosystem, and to overcome the perception of isolation from that system resulting from an inescapable sense of selfhood. Abbey especially demonstrates that it is even undesirable to totally abandon a sense of identity, for rather egoistic reasons of his own.

Song of Solomon engages the tension between ecology and authenticity in terms of racial identity. Chapter 3 considers how the novel takes up and brings together two themes related to reductive equations of racial or ethnic identity with the land: the subversion of wilderness both as an analogue for black savagery and as an environment hostile to black individuals; and a distrust of racial essentialism as the basis for individual subjectivity, community, or politics. Milkman's experience of dissolution in the Virginia woodlands reads almost explicitly as a rejection of the type of rigidly essentialist racial authenticity claimed by other characters, and represents wilderness as an environment of inclusion and natural, unified identity. The novel, representing connection to the ecosystem as a universal condition and challenging the notion that racial others share special kinship with the earth, foregrounds ecology as a conceptual force that destabilizes the factionalism of identity politics. But if Morrison refuses to fully endorse racial identitarianism, she also critiques the universalizing romance of a state of nature for both its indifference toward individuals and its pastoral construction.

Departing from these ideas, Chapter 4 details how Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* responds to ecofeminist appeals to nature as a basis for essential identity with a narrator who takes such appeals seriously. *Surfacing*'s narrator, plagued by multiple oppressive ideals of womanhood, desires to abandon her gendered identity altogether in favor of the sheer human-ness of her material being. Because she envisions this identification chiefly through biological functions—consumption and death, the intake of matter and the unavoidable fact that human matter is in turn recycled—she imagines her selfhood dispersed. This quest for expansive identity proves impossible. A sense of self always reasserts itself. She emerges from the Canadian wilderness feeling as ambivalent about her identity as she did when she entered, but she ultimately welcomes the return of her old, socially mediated and individually constructed self because she comes to recognize that true dissolution in and identification with the ecosystem amounts to nothing more than death.

This fate looms large in *Into the Wild*, the subject of Chapter 5. Christopher McCandless is a true believer. Despite his many contradictions, he more or less consistently conflates dissolution with self-identity and truly believes himself dissolved and dispersed, defined entirely by the ecosystem. As such, he does the most authentically ecological thing possible: he dies. Krakauer crafts a dialogue between himself and the fictionalized McCandless, in which the author sets McCandless' ecological identity against the ambivalence of his own ecological consciousness, caught between his sense of unique and bounded selfhood and an awareness of ecological interconnectivity. We cannot escape a socially mediated sense of self, Krakauer concludes, and nor should we. If our identities

were truly, holistically ecological, we might as well die, and let our matter live on as it is recycled throughout the ecosystem.

Assuming an anti-essentialist stance, these texts acknowledge ecological interconnectivity as a universal condition, but maintain the necessity of culturally mediated and individually constructed identity positions from which to recognize that condition. The literary representations of dissolution surveyed in the following chapters suggest not only that dissolution always fails, but that failure is *beneficial*. If one takes too seriously a dissolutive identity—that is to say, an identity framed as ecologically natural or essential—the best one can hope for is a satisfying death, in that one's matter or energy will carry on: one would be truly, physically dispersed. Dissolution is an enabling fiction that facilitates connection among individuals and other creatures, but the trope's importance lies in its collapse, in identity's recoherence. The imaginative act of dissolution, a conceptual reach toward grasping the system, might be a useful step toward ecological consciousness, but consciousness itself requires that recoherence. As such, dissolution is entirely rhetorical, a trope that ultimately meditates on the question of selfhood as it is challenged by a cultural climate that takes ecology, and all the implications of interconnectivity, to be a foundational scientific model for being in the world, for political action, and for the construction of identity itself.

CHAPTER 2

The Ecological Alternative: Civilization and Selfhood in *Desert Solitaire* and *The Snow Leopard*

What we call wildness is a civilization other than our own.

Henry David Thoreau, *Writings of Thoreau*

". . . civilization needs us."
"What civilization?" he says.
"You said it. That's why they need us."

Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*

The United States celebrated the first Earth Day on 22 April 1970 in a web of grassroots celebrations and demonstrations that converged on a commitment to spread the word about environmental crisis. The idea for Earth Day began with Wisconsin senator Gaylord Nelson, who proposed a "National Teach-In on the Crisis of the Environment" at a Seattle symposium in 1969 (Gottlieb 105). The idea was to stage a teach-in on the state of the environment, both nationally and worldwide. The event responded directly to the surge in national interest regarding quality-of-life issues over the previous decade, which would bureaucratically manifest in a bloom of pollution control legislation in the early 1970s. In emulating the teach-ins of the Vietnam War protests of the preceding decade, Earth Day looked to the New Left and associated radical movements for its program. Nelson's choice of genre was shrewd, however. He thought this comparatively tame form of protest a more moderate curriculum that would distance the event from the New Left and counterculture. Denis Hayes, the Harvard law school student whom Nelson selected to help organize the event, intended for Earth Day's decentralized arrangement to curb the confrontational politics by which it was partially inspired (Gottlieb 107). The New Left, on the other side of the table, sought to distance itself from the event and the environmentalist label attached

to it. For many in the Movement, environmentalism carried associations with population control and urban-elite wilderness protection.[13] Just as the environmental movement began to achieve some kind of national shape, the strong influence it found in the New Left started to recede amidst ambivalent and at times contradictory motivations among Earth Day's diverse sponsors and participants.

Two states over from Earth Day's home in Washington, Edward Abbey appeared at the Logan, Utah, iteration of the event. Abbey's audience responded positively to his prepared speech on corporate malpractice and the need for environmentalist activism. Many of the people in the crowd were familiar with *Desert Solitaire* (1968), which Abbey had published two years previously. Earth Day marked the first nationwide organization of individuals concerned about the environment, and the moment clearly delineated an audience for Abbey's writing. The publication of *Desert Solitaire* just as the environmental movement was pulling together is a matter of what James Bishop refers to as "good timing." If Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) provided the brain of the movement, Abbey furnished the often-bleeding heart for early environmentalists "eager for inspiration and anti-establishment eloquence" (148). *Desert Solitaire* became, as Russell Martin puts it, "required reading . . . for the coming-of-age of the environmental movement" (287).

Abbey, in fact, had an affair with one of the Earth Day organizers, Ingrid Eisenstadter, whom he met that day (Cahalan 124). Abbey and Eisenstadter rafted down the Colorado River with a friend a few days later on 4 May 1970—the day the National

[13] Of the New Leftists who specifically devoted attention to the environmentalist cause, Barry Weisberg was perhaps the most vocal in response to Earth Day, writing that to "argue that everyone is in the same boat . . . that everyone must work together" is to, unwittingly or otherwise, support "the further consolidation of power and profit in the hands of those responsible for the present dilemma" (159). Weisberg's comments reflected the strong conviction among radicals that Earthy Day's fuzzy approach to communal effort obscured the corporate powers responsible for environmental degradation to begin with.

Guard opened fire on and killed four students at Kent State University in Ohio. The timing of Abbey's holiday in Cataract Canyon is indicative of his life during this period of unrest, which reads like a record of absence (he was fire spotting in a remote region of the country during the 1968 Democratic Convention riots in Chicago). Wendell Berry points out that Abbey is especially "hard" on "movements": "the more solemn and sacred they are, the more they tempt his ridicule" ("Few Words" 8).

But if Abbey did not typically associate with his activist contemporaries, he felt a "guilty envy" of "those who actually act," as well as "a little faint glow of hope" that replaced an earlier vague sympathy tinged with cynicism (*Down* 108). He did participate in Vietnam War demonstrations, and was involved with the antinuclear movement in the 1970s (Cahalan 99). And he forcefully frames *Desert Solitaire* in anticommercial terms when he observes that "most of what I write about in this book is already gone or going under fast" (xii). In *Down the River* he warns that corporate bigwigs "have finally awakened to the fact that environmentalism, if taken seriously, is a greater threat . . . than labor unions or Communism" (6). Abbey's dismissal of the efficacy of both communism and American leftism recalls the New Left's disappointment in its forebears: the apprehension that "[t]he traditional base of labor's power and social influence . . . is vanishing" and that "[l]iberalism has adopted a neutral managerial role" (SDS, *America* 180). For Scott Slovic it is "no coincidence" that writers like Abbey, Berry, Annie Dillard, and Barry Lopez advance an "anti-ideological" position in their ecological writing just as environmental consciousness takes off. If nothing else, the lack of firm ideological positions among these writers indicates a yearning beyond establishment technology and entrenched biases against the natural world, on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Abbey rejects

communists as well as capitalists for much the same reason as his revolutionary cousins: they "believe above all in technology, the ever-expanding economy . . . industrialism, militarism, centralized control—the complete domination of nature and human beings" (*Down* 7). An early trip West through Montana revealed to an adolescent Abbey sorry working conditions that led him to believe the corporate betrayals of his native Appalachia were more far-reaching than he originally thought (J. Bishop 63). Authority in general came to signify for Abbey the degradation of both the human individual and the natural world. In Berry's interpretation, Abbey "understands that to defend and conserve oneself as a human being in the fullest, truest sense, one must defend and conserve many others and much else. What would be the hope of being personally whole in a dismembered society?" ("Few Words" 5).

This chapter will examine how *Desert Solitaire* frames the desert as an *alternative*, in the sense in which the New Left popularly made use of the word. As early as the *Port Huron Statement*, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) proclaimed its "initial task in establishing alternatives"— "alternatives that will involve uncomfortable personal efforts" (such as desert habitation, perhaps) but which "must be argued as never before" (172). This commitment developed into the Movement's need for the creation of "parallel institutions and/or counter-communities" to form "an alternative political structure of 'American democracy,'" a call delivered at the 1968 Vocations for Radicals conference in Boston, the same year *Desert Solitaire* was published (Gottlieb and Piercy 407). While radicals continued to question the efficacy of these institutional proposals, beyond their role as symbolic communities intended to raise consciousness, the call to formulate an

alternative society became a chief feature of the New Left, as well as the later counterculture as such calls depoliticized.

Furthermore, in ambivalently rejecting the perennial dualism between "nature" and "culture," *Desert Solitaire* frames wilderness itself as a new civilization, an alternative to the destructive and alienating forces of industrial and postindustrial capitalist culture. Abbey's liberal use of these abstract terms calls attention to their centrality in his work. Barry Lopez would likewise write in *Arctic Dreams* (1986) that "we need a more particularized understanding of the land itself—not a mere refined mathematical knowledge, but a deeper understanding of its nature, as if it were, itself, another sort of civilization we had to reach some agreement with" (11). And Abbey's one time mentor Wallace Stegner hearkens back to what he suggests is an older model of civilization that once existed and has since been forgotten: "I wanted to hunt up and rejoin the civilization I had been deprived of" (4).[14] Ours is a species, he seems to suggest, that once dwelt peaceably within a lost, more authentic civilization. Humankind has repressed its true civilization. This notion of "wilderness" as another or earlier form of "civilization" is clearly common to an entire body of nature writing.

Even so, for Abbey the terms of this new, "ecological" civilization are unclear. Throughout *Desert Solitaire*, he oscillates between the solidity of what he presents as an authentic ego—his belligerent attitude, pride in self-reliance, and integrity in the face of

[14] Abbey, who believed his mentor suffered from "an excess of moderation," is significantly more bombastic, libertarian, and permissive than Stegner (Gessner 12). It would be unsurprising if Stegner in turn believed Abbey somewhat representative of "the excess of excess that marked the 60s" (12), rather ironically, as this chapter will demonstrate, even if Abbey did at times seem to embody the very excess Stegner lamented (at one point partying with University of New Mexico students in pagan fervor, and having once burned down a small adobe home he was supposed to be watching, with little remorse). And yet even if "one man believed in culture while the other, in a very deep and engrained sense, was countercultural" (12), both men sought in wilderness a new civilization.

commodity culture—and his role in the greater ecosystem that subordinates him and renders him unimportant. The desert ecosystem is a context in which Abbey's selfhood seems to periodically dissolve. If Abbey joins radical social theorists like Herbert Marcuse in trying to reconcile civilization and nature, he also reveals how this reconciliation engenders a tension between self and ecology. He also professes to break with the counterculture just as he begins to furnish it with some anarchist inspiration, even as the tension he demonstrates between his personal resistance to consumer culture and his investment in the dissolution of the very ego that grounds that resistance resonated with various movements. Read in conversation with other narratives of wilderness retreat, especially Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* (1978), *Desert Solitaire* questions contemporaneous countercultural projects that sought to totally erase the distinction between self and other. But at the same time, these two texts suggest that an imaginative flirtation with such an erasure is desirable for an ecological civilization, in that it inspires a level of recognition of one's position in an ecosystem.[15] Ultimately, while both of these writers take enjoyment in the notion that the ego is something of a useful fiction, in which both men take great pride, they find even more useful what we might call the fiction of dissolution, because it enables them to imagine the material fact of their ecological interconnectivity.

As early as his anarchist first novel *Jonathan Troy* (1954), Abbey warns readers that mere escape or retreat from civilization to wilderness is not enough to solve any perceived conflict between the two. Like "nature" and "wilderness," the word

[15] *The Snow Leopard* garnered far more attention in the literary mainstream than *Desert Solitaire*, winning the National Book Award in 1979 in the "Contemporary Thought" category, and following on the heels of Matthiessen's earlier *Wildlife in America* (1959), which alongside *Silent Spring* became a sort of Bible for conservation and preservation.

“civilization” suggests potential meanings as diverse as attempts to pin them down. The notion that “civilization” and “nature” are interdependent and falsely divided concepts, however, is not a new one. In a 1933 issue of the *Journal of Forestry* Aldo Leopold writes, “A harmonious relation to land is more intricate, and of more consequence to civilization, than the historians of its progress seem to realize.” He refers here specifically to environmentalist historians of industrialism’s negative impact on the natural world: “Civilization is not, as they often assume, the enslavement of a stable and consistent earth. It is a state of mutual and interdependent cooperation between humans and animals, other animals, plants and soils, which may be disrupted at any moment by the failure of any of them” (635). On the one hand, Leopold suggests nature is a concept to be circumscribed and managed by civilization. But the implication of the rhetoric with which Leopold presents his argument is that nature is encompassed by civilization just as civilization is encompassed by nature—an inverse way of phrasing the matter predictive of Abbey’s rhetorical position by which “nature” or “wilderness” is framed as a *different form* of civilization. Abbey writes favorably of Leopold’s dictum to “think like a mountain”—“And feel like a river, says I” (5). For Abbey, all the world’s a mountain. Porcupine, deer, and other creatures “become victims of human meddling with the natural scheme of things.”[16] And yet one wonders what, exactly, feeling like a river adds to Leopold’s original and influential appeal to a “deeper meaning, known only to the mountain itself” (137). It is worth noting that, taken together, these dicta present a highly gendered distinction between two approaches to ecology, a point that will be considered in more detail below.

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[16] Of course, the only meddling Abbey forgives is his own (at one point, he tumbles stones down a ravine in Glen Canyon, “Doing my bit to help, of course, aiding natural processes and verifying the hypotheses of geological morphology”).

"*Thinking* like a mountain" rationalizes and masculinizes a scientific, knowledge-based approach to the ecosystem, while Abbey's "*feeling* like a river" feminizes what he represents as an identity position—not scientific method, but what comes to resemble an attempt at ecosystem embodiment.

Abbey, however, approaches the ecologist's terminology flippantly, and in *The Journey Home* remarks that, after encountering the word in an H. G. Wells volume some twenty years prior, "I still don't know what it means. Or seriously much care. Nor am I primarily concerned with nature as living museum, the preservation of spontaneous plants and wild animals" (228-9). He is up front about the fact that he studied philosophy, not biology or ecology. He considers himself an amateur philosopher, not a naturalist. All of which is to say that Abbey is concerned not primarily with science, but with the human experience of the processes ecology describes.

His primary concern, as James Bishop puts it, is "writing in defense of himself as part of nature" (31). *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey writes, "is not primarily a book about the desert." This declaration would appear to vindicate the author's constant pushback against the nature writer brand he received throughout his life. Abbey's distrust of the label stems in part, James McClintock suggests, from the fact that it "is often a label for a genteel, if durable, literary occupation practiced by natural historians" (41). The designation is soft, and does not, for Abbey, appear to accomplish anything. David Copland Morris writes that Abbey rejects this association because its token writers' "names carried connotations of earnestness, reverence, and perhaps even piety" (21). The suggestion underlying these readings would seem to be that Abbey's boisterousness, his belligerence and take-no-prisoners attitude, even his sexism and casual racism, prove him more honest what he saw

as the pastoral hypocrisies of a gaggle of limp-wristed romantics who return to their cities as soon as they get their fill. His posturing would seem to be an attempt at an expression of authentic Abbeyness. This interpretation forcefully bolsters Abbey's own announcement that his interests, in *Desert Solitaire*, reach beyond the desert he claims to love. His works, he insists, "belong to the category of personal history rather than natural history" (*Journey* xiii). He derives the text from his journals and shares a New Left commitment to authenticity that, by virtue of his combined dedication to both observation and perception, expands the notion of "accuracy" by placing emphasis on "[n]ot imitation but evocation" (x). In reality, Abbey's "season in the wilderness" spanned many seasons, in 1956 and 1957, and his rafting trip in Glen Canyon took place in 1959 (Cahalan 52).[17] Abbey's comments that "most of the substance of this book" is taken from journals is meant, as Paul Bryant writes, to "throw us off the trail" (3). Despite all protests to the contrary, *Desert Solitaire* is not a pure explosion of authentic selfhood or observation, but a doubly filtered text—through journal and composition—organized around an ideal Abbey, a fictional pioneer of an alternative civilization.

The question of *Desert Solitaire*'s narrative, however, does not seem to Abbey to be a matter of fiction or nonfiction, truth or falsehood. It is a reflection of what Lopez, in his 1984 essay "Landscape and Narrative," describes as the traditional Native American valuation of story, the effort "to separate the authentic from the inauthentic" (*Crossing* 66). While it might be false that Abbey celebrated a single season in the wilderness, his

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[17] Abbey takes liberty with the veracity of his account. He invents names for some of his acquaintances from Moab, and "in a couple of cases relocated them in space and time" (1968, xii). He in fact freely admitted the extreme extent to which he fictionalized his experiences, joking with a friend years after *Desert Solitaire* about his encounter with a phantom moon-eyed horse, "Did that really happen or did I make that up?" (Cahalan 68). And if the text does not deliberately embellish history, it does obscure certain details: outside the margins of the story, Abbey struggled to support his wife and children on his meager ranger salary (Cahalan 65).

presentation of it, he seems to believe, is ineffably authentic, precisely because the landscape he describes is characterized by a particular Abbeyness. “If the exterior landscape is limned well,” Lopez writes, “the listener often feels that he has heard something pleasing and authentic” (66). That landscape might be limned not by excruciating scientific detail, but instead by action and reaction, feeling and sensibility, that are authentically Abbey’s.

Desert Solitaire is not about what just anybody can see in the southeastern Utah desert—it is about what *Abbey* sees. The narrative conveys foremost not what is meaningful, but what is meaningful to Abbey; not what is pleasurable, but what is pleasurable to him; and not what is troubling, but what is troubling to him. This approach to nature writing characterizes many postwar accounts of retreat, including Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), which Lawrence Buell describes as employing “the aesthetics of the not-there as a principle of environmental representation,” or, more specifically, foregrounding the “speaker’s fascination with the process of seeing, not the objects seen” (*Environmental Imagination* 73-4). Abbey and Dillard do not concern themselves with conventional mimesis. Their observance of realism responds instead to the cult of experience that circulated within and beyond the counterculture and new social movements. Abbey esteems the verisimilitude of his representation of the southern Utah desert not according to accurate portrayal of each grain of sand, but against its resonance with his own personality.

Abbey even stretches his emphatic sense of individualism to represent an ecologically expanded politics of authenticity. He displays a strong reflex against anthropomorphizing, a commitment—sometimes upheld, sometimes forgotten—to

"confront, immediately and directly if it's possible, the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental . . . I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself" (*Desert Solitaire* 6). Abbey's fierce loyalty to his own sense of individuality here translates into a respect for individuality on a wider scale, beyond the human. He presents as a moral imperative the engagement with an object in such a way that it is "devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities . . . even the categories of scientific description." Animals, he writes, "wish nothing from us but the right to pursue happiness in their own manner" (*Journey* 64). As Harold Fromm makes clear, an early tenet of ecocriticism holds that it is "impossible for human beings to know the intrinsic interests of animals and trees" (4). Abbey does not seem to attempt to speak for the natural world as to what it wants, but he does suggest that it *does* want, in the process ascribing a human hunger to the nonhuman.[18]

Abbey wrestles with the difficulty of liberating nature without applying human attributes to its constituents. He ends his anti-anthropomorphic proclamation with the more ambitious commitment to exercise such egalitarian recognition "even if it means risking everything human in myself" (*Desert Solitaire* 6). To meet the other, or the nonhuman, on its own terms—to recognize it for what it is naturally and authentically, in itself—is intrinsically tied, for Abbey, to the dismissal of his own sense of humanity. But this inclination, too, is a reflex he fights against in an ascetic context in which, ideally, "the

[18] *Desert Solitaire* appears to attempt to validate the endgame of what Marcuse calls the "New Science," proposed in his *Essay on Liberation* (1971)—the transformation of technology in such a way that human engineering is coterminous with the changing of nature. The transformation (or liberation) of nature, as Steven Vogel puts it, "somehow leaves nature as it is" (4). That is, the liberation of nature occurs for nature in its own interest—it renders nature as it has its own potential to be (whatever that interest might in fact be, Marcuse does not presume to guess).

naked self merges with a nonhuman world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate."

However paradoxical such a wish for dissolution while remaining "intact" may be, "feeling like a river" might after all be an oceanic feeling—a vacated sensibility, an attempted identification with both everything and nothing, as when Abbey describes the desert as "a vast world, an oceanic world" (x). In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Sigmund Freud describes the "sensation of eternity," the "feeling as of something limitless, unbounded," as "'oceanic'" (24). The oceanic feeling names an infantile non-detection of boundaries that persists and exists "side by side with the narrower and more sharply demarcated ego-feeling of maturity, like a kind of counterpart" (29). Like many 1960s radicals, Abbey was influenced by psychoanalysis, which made its way into the period's revolutionary discourse through figures like Marcuse, who redefined social reality as an infinite number of possible repressive conditions, of which one is ostensibly the least repressive. As Theodore Roszak observes, what Marcuse calls the performance principle, the psychic organization of "repressive civilization," is only the "prevailing" reality principle (*Making* 101). It was toward the least repressive reality principle—the organization of a new civilization—that revolutionaries aimed. But Marcuse also aimed to blend this minimal state with oceanic feeling, the leftovers of an unbounded pleasure principle.

If Abbey's purpose is not to describe the desert, one might argue that it is to describe what he believes to be a morally superior way of life—not just for the individual, but for human civilization. In one of his more lucid passages on the subject, Abbey writes: "A civilization which destroys what little remains of the wild, the spare, the original, is cutting

itself off from its origins and betraying the principle of civilization itself" (192). By using the indefinite article "a," Abbey suggests that civilization is not a monolithic concept. He does not get around to explaining what, exactly, the "principle of civilization" is. But the passage's emphasis on "origins" reveals a fundamental collapse of the two terms—what Abbey understands as civilization and wilderness—into each other. Wilderness is itself not only an alternative, but the original and proper mode of civilization. *Desert Solitaire* seeks to concretize the "naturalization" of civilization postulated by New Left social theory. But as Abbey collapses these two terms, he begins to identify with the ecosystem itself, which he experiences and describes as unbounded.

Abbey's Alternative

In the early 1980s, Stewart Brand wrote that he intended the *Whole Earth Catalog* to "help my friends who were starting their own civilization hither and yon in the sticks"—a Jeffersonian movement of countercultural types going back to the land. As the New Left began to collapse, ecology came to be viewed as a "fresh oppositional alternative" that "stressed immediate, local affiliations and personal transformation as the path to a new age" (Belasco 24). Environmentalism began to focus in directions outside the political spotlight, in thousands of urban and rural communes, "cultural and environmental waystations" that were "ad hoc experiments rather than strategically defined alternatives" (Gottlieb 103).

Abbey's Moab desert, which he refers to as "my all-too-perishable republic" (151), takes part in this general shift toward the communal. He dedicates a considerable portion of *Desert Solitaire* to the decree of rules, regulations, and laws not only for wilderness habitation and etiquette, but for human society in general. Concerning national parks,

especially, he details several guidelines for the new republic (no more cars, no more roads, no more lazy park rangers). Elsewhere, he provides "a few tips on desert etiquette," which include, among basic survival skills, the commandment to monkeywrench, to "always remove and destroy survey stakes, flagging, advertising signboards" (*Journey* 19). This code—never cohesive and frequently contradictory—in many ways echoes the "Laws of Ecology," set forth by Barry Commoner in commandment fashion, as if etched on tablets (First Law, Second Law, etc.), in *The Closing Circle*: Everything Is Connected to Everything Else, Everything Must Go Somewhere, Nature Knows Best, There Is No Such Thing as a Free Lunch (33-48).

These examples illustrate the impulse to codify what Abbey and Commoner understand as certain laws of ecology-as-society. *Desert Solitaire* is one part philosophical treatise, one part constitution, and one part declaration of independence for a new civilization, or at the very least an enclave. For Abbey, American civilization as we know it has reached an end; it is time "to move on, to find another country or—in the name of Jefferson—to make another country" (185). Abbey is in fact accused by a park visitor of being "against civilization." "Naturally I was flattered," he writes, "and at the same time surprised, hurt, a little shocked." How "could I be against humanity without being against myself, whom I love . . . how could I be against civilization when all which I most willingly defend and venerate—including the love of wilderness—is comprehended by the term?" (274). Ultimately, Abbey determines that it is not mankind he hates, but "man-centeredness"—not civilization, but "culture," "the way of life of any given human society considered as a whole" (275). Abbey's rhetoric recalls Marcuse's conviction that civilization need not always be "repressive civilization," as he writes in *Eros and*

Civilization (1955). A certain amount of repression is necessary for the survival of mankind, but repression freed from the dictates of establishment coercion and manipulation would manifest to a far more limited extent for both the individual and civilization as a whole. Implicit in Marcuse's argument is the suggestion that if repression is necessary, or even "natural," so too is civilization. Throughout *Desert Solitaire,* Abbey takes this reconciliation rather seriously, and presents wilderness—a return to something *most* natural—as this very alternative. Abbey embraces the notion that freedom—from repression, from technology—occurs in both individual and sociocultural registers: "if we allow the freedom of the hills and the last of the wilderness to be taken from us, then the very idea of freedom may die with it" (*Down* 121).

But if Abbey more or less clearly distinguishes between civilization and culture, his definition of wilderness, the term he uses to classify the earth in its unblemished aspects, in a natural vitality of life and community among organisms, is far more opaque. On the one hand, wilderness is a complement that "completes" civilization: "We need wilderness whether or not we ever set foot in it" (148). On the other, Abbey declares that "wilderness is a necessary part of civilization" (54). He vacillates on the question of whether wilderness is a part of civilization or exists outside it, as a retreat. Lamenting the construction of a new highway through Zion National Park, Abbey writes that the northwestern portion "has until recently been saved as almost virgin wilderness" (53). "Virgin wilderness," a longstanding rhetorical flourish on the part of settler men identifying land with woman (which will be considered in more detail in Chapter 4), here seems to refer less to no human presence than to no human manufacture—no technology or industry, no alteration.[19] Abbey would be

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[19] For a thorough consideration of this trope and how it fits into environmental history more broadly, see Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*

perfectly pleased with human presence in Zion, specifically his own. He also suggests that the only thing better than solitude is "society": "By society I do not mean the roar of city streets . . . or human life in general. I mean the society of a friend or friends or a good, friendly woman" (110-11). Abbey's sexism, the notion that a "good, friendly woman" is not included in "the society of a friend or friends," and provides her own, special means of entry to wilderness-as-civilization, underwrites his later dissolutive rhetoric.

This line also suggests that wilderness and human habitation are not mutually exclusive. Abbey writes that the destruction of wilderness fulfills "the requirements of—not man—but industry" (54). While Abbey writes at length on the dangers of industrial tourism to the natural parks, he also observes that "the chief victims of the system are the motorized tourists. They are being robbed and robbing themselves" (59).[20] This passage perhaps surprisingly subordinates the value of the natural world to human pleasure in two ways. Abbey suggests that the national parks exist primarily for the enjoyment of their human visitors, and also that humanity is the true victim of industry. We might write off the first of these subordinations as one of Abbey's many contradictions. The rest of the text clearly does not represent the parks as handmaiden to human pleasure, but existing in and of themselves, for themselves. The second, however, reveals a more subtle concern, which permeates the book, regarding what, for Abbey, renders a person authentically human. Abbey's critique in this chapter specifically targets industrial tourism, but implicit in his

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(1984) and Susan R. Schrepfer's *Nature's Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism* (2005).

[20] The diminishment of human fulfillment, for Abbey, is by no means totally self-inflicted. Abbey reflects specifically on how Utahns have long been victims of a uranium industry fueled by invisible speculators, "numerous in our society, eager to profit from the labor of others, anxious to harvest what they had not sown" (73).

argument is a broader declaration in support of authentic personhood, a mandate for the pursuit of personal fulfillment tied to psychic wellbeing and psychic freedom.

The authentically human, for Abbey, is a walking, experiencing creature who does not rely on technology as mediator between self and world.[21] Even if Abbey does not consider himself a revolutionary in the strict sense of the word, he yearns to help liberate these tourists: "What can I tell them? Sealed in their metallic shells like molluscs on wheels, how can I pry the people free? The auto as tin can, the park ranger as opener" (*Desert Solitaire* 261). And the tourist, presumably, as sardine. In one of his many diatribes against visiting parks in cars, Abbey bombastically apostrophizes his guests: "Yes sir, yes madam, I entreat you, get out of those motorized wheelchairs, get off your foam rubber backsides, stand up straight like men! like women! like human beings! and walk—*walk*—WALK upon our sweet and blessed land!" (262). Abbey's claim that "the desert is a realm beyond the human" should therefore not be interpreted merely as another contradiction (270). Abbey seeks to redefine himself as something simultaneously more than and less than human, as this chapter's introduction suggests and the discussion below will further explore; Abbey's ideal peers are more animal than human. Despite the desert's hostility, Abbey suggests that it lends itself "to extended periods of habitation" (271). Abbey likes the desert, in other words, not because it is impossible to live in, but because it weeds out the soft automata of industrial and postindustrial civilization.

Solitude and needful labor breed community. Because of their isolation, and especially because of their remove from televisions, automobiles, and other technologies,

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[21] This conclusion leads him to behave rather cruelly toward the infirm, however: he suggests that they have had their chance in youth to experience national parks. This same prejudice crops up elsewhere, such as in the lines quoted at the end of this paragraph. If Abbey's civilization freely welcomes all races and genders, it seems to offer no room for the disabled.

the Moabites are more courteous, interesting, and generous neighbors. The supermarket and bar's "general atmosphere is free and friendly, quite unlike the sad, sour gloom of most bars I have known, where nervous men in tight collars brood over their drinks between out-of-tune TV screens and a remorseless clock" (47). His attention to collars and clocks indicts the regimented time of industry, and the increasingly postindustrial workforce of the American middle class. "Collar" signifies not only the top button of a starched shirt but also the leash around a dog's neck, worn by people whom he elsewhere pities as living "lives of unquiet desperation" (*Down* 39).[22] Notably, Abbey does not make any distinction between town and country; Moab is itself a healthy hub of wilderness, while still being a site of human activity and, to a diminished and need-based extent, production.[23] This portion of the narrative illustrates Abby's understanding of wilderness as an alternative civilization.

Abbey's interaction with nonhuman creatures, however, demonstrates an ambivalence at work in this reconciliation of civilization and wilderness. His confusion over the terms of his new civilization begins to reveal itself in a frequently discussed episode during which he deliberates over the life of a rabbit. Abbey wonders whether he should "give the rabbit a sporting chance . . . or brain the little bastard where he is" (38).

[22] In *People or Personnel* (1965), Paul Goodman describes how "the centralizing style of organization" (3) creates a situation in which "persons are personnel" (7), which Goodman likens to human *matériel*: "the emphasis is on the personification of the organization . . . it is a striking force with a unitary will of its own; the persons are part of its means, along with the material means" (126). Abbey quite explicitly makes the same distinction between "people" and "personnel": his native Utahns suffer much the same fate as the Navajo Indians, who have been grafted to "the regimentation of application forms and time clock" (121).

[23] Abbey dances around a line between work and play he wants to collapse. Concerning a fellow ranch hand, Abbey writes that "it would be false to say Viviano is exploited. How can you exploit a man who enjoys his work?" (97). Abbey himself considers his wrangling and patrolling work matters of pleasure: "'I do this only for fun . . . If I did it for pay I might not like it" (161). While on the one hand this sentiment engages the idea of the desert as a liberated society, Abbey takes for granted that he has *chosen* this kind of labor, and that he finds it desirable in the first place. Viviano's labor, undertaken as it is by a Latino migrant, is marked by race in a way Abbey's is not. Abbey works in the desert during a long hiatus from graduate school, after all: he chooses his labor and calls it pleasure, a luxury Viviano does not have.

He reflexively draws attention to his word choice: “A sportsman is one who gives his quarry a chance to escape with its life . . . Animals have no sense of sportsmanship.” This remarkably contradictory moment can be read as yet another attempt to de-personify the natural world—to deny sportsmanship to a creature that, not being human, cannot be a sportsman on its own terms, as an authentic rabbit. Yet Abbey stifles this position when he announces that he’s “a scientist not a sportsman and we’ve got an important experiment under way here, for which the rabbit has been volunteered.” This directive both flies in the face of Abbey’s earlier oath to abandon even “the categories of scientific description” and robs the rabbit of any authentic rabbit-agency Abbey earlier, we assume, would have greeted it as possessing. The rabbit, of course, dies instantly when Abbey bashes it over the head with a rock. And for a second he is “shocked” by the murder, but this sensation gives way to a feeling of “mild elation”: “I try but cannot feel any sense of guilt. I examine my soul: white as snow. . . . No longer do I feel isolated from the sparse and furtive life around me, a stranger from another world. I have entered this one. We are kindred all of us, killer and victim, predator and prey.” This scene of apparently senseless violence has given many critics pause. Abbey immediately experiences a sensation of purity as he crosses the threshold into this new civilization—and the words “white as snow” signal yet another feminized metaphor. And yet he gains nothing from killing the rabbit—he uses neither its meat nor its pelt nor its bones. The important detail about Abbey’s act does not seem to be what he does or does not use of the rabbit’s body, but the spirit in which he kills the thing. Despite his initial hesitation, the act itself appears to be totally spontaneous.

Spontaneity, as a lifestyle, forms a cornerstone of the politics of another wilderness anarchist. Murray Bookchin writes that “far from inviting chaos,” spontaneity “involves

releasing the inner forces of a development to find their authentic order and stability," and "spontaneity in social life converges with spontaneity in nature to provide the basis for an ecological society" so that "[n]atural ecology becomes social ecology" (*Anarchism* 21). Bookchin appears to believe two things about spontaneity. First, it is the foremost expression of the self—a bodily verbalization of natural impulse and individual decision; and second, because of its "natural" origin, it finds its apotheosis of expression in ecological systems, particularly the doctrine of evolution. For Bookchin, spontaneity challenges hierarchical power and the manipulation of natural systems. The "rediscovery" of spontaneity, which dwells beyond the ordered manipulation of establishment mechanization, is "nourished" by ecology, which reveals that balance in the natural world "is achieved by organic variation and complexity, not by homogeneity and simplification. . . . the more varied the flora and fauna of an ecosystem, the more stable the population" (41).

This perspective illuminates Abbey's attack on the rabbit as the moment at which he announces his new civilization as one defined by ecological interconnectivity (though he does not, of course, stoop so low as to make use of such vocabulary).[24] For Abbey in his patch of desert, social mores are replaced by, or overlaid with, ecological forces—a respect not for capital or technology, but for sustenance and recycled energy, for hunters and prey and other citizens who eat them all. As such, he leaves his "victim to the vultures and maggots, who will appreciate him more than I could . . . I continue my walk." Abbey has a similarly profound encounter with a snake, although he chooses to befriend the

[24] Although he does refer to fire ecology—the measured allowance of wildfires, rather than their extermination, to pave the way for biosystem rejuvenation—as "subversive," and heartily claims himself a practitioner (*Journey* 50). And he is closely in tune with signs of ecological imbalance—even the appearance of tumbleweeds signals, for him, the "signs of overgrazing" (60).

serpent because it lives beneath his house trailer and they are neighbors. He enjoys the snake's company so much he keeps it in his shirt while he patrols the park. And the snake, "being a cold-blooded creature . . . takes his temperature from that of the immediate environment—in this case my body. We are compatible" (22). Their codependent relationship—heat for the snake, companionship for Abbey—belies a preoccupation with continuity that becomes more apparent as the narrative progresses.

So powerful for Abbey is the allure of this sense of continuity in wilderness that even the stones in the canyons of Arches take on an interpenetrative significance: "At first look it all seems like a geologic chaos, but there is method at work here, method of a fantastic order and perseverance: each groove in the rock leads to a natural channel of some kind, each channel to a ditch and gulch and ravine, each larger waterway to a canyon bottom or broad wash leading in turn to the Colorado River and the sea" (11). Where does each waterway begin and end? This is a crucially unsolvable question for Abbey, and its implications for his project reach beyond the mutability of water. Where, too, does Abbey begin and the river end?

Feeling Like a River

As Abbey and his companion Ralph Newcomb begin to float down the Colorado River in Glen Canyon on a leisurely expedition of twelve days and 150 miles, Abbey remarks that his initial anxieties about drifting with neither direction nor control have "vanished and I feel instead a sense of cradlelike security, of achievement and joy, a pleasure almost equivalent to that first entrance—from the outside—into the neck of the womb" (176).[25]

[25] Abbey's Glen Canyon is, as Jared Farmer puts in, an imagined place: a reconstructed memory of "a place that seems too perfect to be real" (155). In part our knowledge of this representation stems from the discrepancies between Abbey's journal and the book—but more importantly, it arises from our understanding that *Desert Solitaire* is not about the desert, but about a fictionalized Abbey, the settler of desert civilization.

The "neck of the womb" presents a bizarre metaphor. It evokes first the vagina, suggesting that Abbey's pleasure is foremost sexual—he aims to screw his way to "cradlelike security"—before it emphasizes the maternal. The three-word interjection, "from the outside," from beyond the canyon into it, shifts our comprehension of the metaphor. The latter half of this sentence, with all its maternal imagery, seems not to evoke the act of birth, but to reverse its direction. Abbey maintains this imagery of severance but also of entrance: "Cutting the bloody cord, that's what we feel, the delirious exhilaration of independence, a rebirth backward in time and into primeval liberty" (177). These deployments of uterine language suggest that liberty is what happens when one is shoved back into the womb.[26]

Abbey treats wilderness as a woman to be penetrated and/or occupied, a synonym for freedom and something already known but lost, something that has been repressed:

> Suppose we say that wilderness invokes nostalgia . . . The word suggests the past and the unknown, the womb of earth from which we all emerged. It means something lost and something still present, something remote and at the same time intimate, something buried in our blood and nerves, something beyond us and without limit. (189-90)

Wilderness, he continues, is loyalty to the earth that bore and sustains us. It is a paradise that still includes "disease and death and the rotting of the flesh." Wilderness, in other words, is both spatial and psychic; within its boundaries it has the capacity to include *everything*. The notion that intrauterine existence possesses the combined qualities of liberation, freedom, and pleasure evokes conventional psychoanalytic wisdom of the era regarding infancy. Edith Cobb sums up this view of infancy as "a living sense of a dynamic relationship with the outer world. . . . both a sense of discontinuity, an awareness of his

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[26] The prospect of being "consumed" by the mother has been a longstanding dyad of masculine hope and fear throughout psychoanalytic history, as well as in wilderness discourse, as Kolodny illustrates.

own unique separateness and identity, and also a continuity, a renewal of relationship with nature as process" (124).

At the same time, these dissolutive moments tend to focus less on Abbey's supposedly natural identification with the ecosystem—or the metaphorical woman he enlists to represent it—than on the pride Abbey the writer takes in chronicling it. His evocation of a fetal ecosystem resonates not with the womb but with the contemporaneous discourse of the embryo as "metaphor for 'man' in space, floating free," in which "the mother . . . has become empty space" (Rothman 114). Karen Newman argues that *Life*'s Lennart Nilsson photographs, coupled with "deliberate linguistic strategies of persuasion," especially carried on a long history of framing the fetus as "a baby who is rights-bearing, autonomous" (10, 18). Obstetrical knowledge, Newman writes, "allow[s] for a double identificatory pleasure: identification with the immaculate, impenetrable human individual, and the power/knowledge of knowing the body as an object of study" (97). As Rosalind Petchesky points out, "the 'siting' of the womb as a space to be conquered"—which effaces the woman "as absent or peripheral" (268)—"can only be had by one who stands outside it looking in. . . . recalling a wildlife photographer tracking down a gazelle" (Petchesky 276). Abbey likewise imagines himself as that very creature, which he himself may observe in its natural habitat. Abbey imagines himself as a self-made fetus that he positions as a somewhat indeterminate object of study in the wilderness but lauds for its rugged autonomy—an oscillation between feminine and masculine valences. Despite his attention to his ecosystem, these moments tend to erase both ecology and the metaphorical woman he makes represent it. He represents his rebirth as ambivalence, on the one hand praising the individual and on the other recognizing its ecological interpenetration. He equates his

imagined move into womblike wilderness with ecological interconnectivity, and therefore a lack of certainty as to where self begins and ends within an ecosystem.

This confusion manifests frequently throughout *Desert Solitaire* as an apprehension that objects in the environment not only interact, but bleed together, become indistinct. While in the desert wrangling with his employer Roy Scobie and another part-time ranch hand, Abbey searches a ravine for a wayward horse. Suddenly, he pauses: “Something breathing nearby—I was in the presence of a tree. On the slope above stood a giant old juniper with massive, twisted trunk, its boughs sprinkled with the pale-blue inedible berries” (164). The first sentence of this passage seems intentionally misleading. With that dash, the line draws a clear association between the tree and the breathing Abbey hears. The reader’s impulse, like Abbey’s, is to linger and consider this respiratory marvel. On closer inspection, however, Abbey sees that “Hanging from one of the limbs was what looked at first glance like a pair of trousers that reached to the ground. Blinking the sweat out of my eyes I looked harder and saw the trousers transform themselves into the legs of a large animal . . . A very tall horse.” Even when the mystery of the phantom breath is solved, the beginning of this passage casts its source into some doubt. Abbey at first presents the horse and tree, as well as the hallucinated trousers, as indistinguishable. He appears confused as to where tree begins and horse ends.

Even if there is no direct symbiotic relationship between horse and tree—and pants—in this passage, horse and tree are bound, for Abbey, by occupying the same environment, in the same way that Abbey and sand are bound in Glen Canyon: “we’re getting accustomed to sand—sand in our food and drink, in our teeth and eyes and whiskers, in our bedrolls and underwear. Sand becomes a part of our existence which, like

breathing, we take for granted" (186). "Like breathing," sand comes to occupy a role that is constantly interpenetrative for Abbey and Newcomb. And even if, unlike oxygen, nitrogen, and carbon dioxide, sand does not literally cycle through their bodies and pierce their cells, defying conventional wisdom as to where self begins and atmosphere ends, the sand takes on an ecological significance in its sheer presence, the role it plays for Abbey in understanding not just the canyon but also himself.[27]

Dillard foregoes Abbey's womb imagery but professes to similar experiences in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Fowl substitute for the horse and trousers: "I walked up to a tree, an Osage orange, and a hundred birds flew away. They simply materialized out of the tree. I saw a tree, then a whisk of color, then a tree again" (16). These two passages illustrate moments of sensory confusion in which the authors perceive an indistinctness among entities within an environment. These moments, for Dillard, provide a window into what she describes as a simultaneously ecological and spiritual transmission of both energy and matter: "The tomcat that used to wake me is dead; he was long since grist for an earthworm's casting, and is now the clear sap of a Pittsburgh sycamore, or the honeydew of aphids sucked from that sycamore's high twigs and sprayed in sticky drops on a stranger's car" (98). Creatures that have died recycle matter, by virtue of their organic construction, in a way that for Dillard renders them at once less and more than themselves. And so do people.

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[27] For the self-psychologist Heinz Kohut, writing around the same time as Abbey, respiration becomes an important physical illustration of the boundary-disruption that occurs during and persists past primary narcissism: "The indistinctness of 'internal' and 'external' is familiar to all of us in our relationship to the surrounding air which, as we take it in and expel it, is experienced by us as part of our selves, while we hardly perceive it as long as it forms a part of our external surroundings" (75). "Internal" here signifies not just psychic reality, but also the supposed integrity of the human body itself.

A spiritual measure of "consciousness" smooths the distressing self-destabilization at the heart of this ecological worldview. A "heightened awareness," Dillard writes, opens "the great door to the present." To attend to the processes taking place around oneself, and to the self's implication in those processes, is for Dillard a profoundly spiritual *and* pragmatic act, which allows for both ethical living on the planet and reconciliation within the self with the fragility of one's authentic and autonomous selfhood within such a biological system. She writes of all the creatures in the Virginia woods: "My ignoring them won't strip them of their reality, and admitting them, one by one, into my consciousness might heighten mine, might add their dim awareness to my human consciousness" (94). The notion of consciousness serves, for Dillard, the purposes of a sort of conduit, a conception of selfhood that nonetheless welcomes the other beyond the self and imaginatively embraces its interrelation, as best it can, and is in turn enriched by it. Consciousness allows her to negotiate her interpenetration from a fixed point of authentic selfhood, which in the process she nonetheless disrupts.

Tinker Creek is Dillard's representation of this ambivalent peace, "the mediator, benevolent, impartial, subsuming my shabbiest evils and dissolving them, transforming them into live moles, and shiners, and sycamore leaves" (101). The creek represents "the mystery of the continuous creation and all that providence implies: the uncertainty of vision, the horror of the fixed, the dissolution of the present, intricacy of beauty, the pressure of fecundity, the elusiveness of the free" (2-3). Dillard imbues the creek with the representational power to illustrate the boundary-shattering she perceives in matters of ecology.

Abbey invests the Colorado River with similar powers of destabilization. One passage in particular is worth reproducing in its entirety:

> In a blue dawn under the faintest of stars we break our fast, pack our gear and launch the boats again. Farther still into the visionary world of Glen Canyon, talking somewhat less than before—for what is there to say? I think we've about said it all—we communicate less in words and more in direct denotation, the glance, the pointing hand, the subtle nuances of pipe smoke, the tilt of a wilted hat brim. Configurations are beginning to fade, distinctions shading off into blended amalgams of man and man, men and water, water and rock.
>
> "Who is Ralph Newcomb?" I say. "Who is he?"
>
> "Aye," he says. "And who is who? Which is which?"
>
> "Quite," I agree.
>
> We are merging, molecules getting mixed. Talk about intersubjectivity—we are both taking on the coloration of river and canyon, our skin as mahogany as the water on the shady side, our clothing coated with silt, our bare feet caked with mud and tough as lizard skin, our whiskers bleached as the sand—even our eyeballs, what little you can see of them between the lids, have taken on a coral-pink, the color of the dunes. And we smell, I suppose, like catfish. (209)

This passage sharply contrasts with Abbey's reference to Honoré de Balzac on the previous page: "In the desert, there is all and there is nothing. God is there and man is not."[28] "God?" Abbey responds. "Nothing moves but the heat waves, rising from the naked rock. . . . God? . . . who the hell is *He*? There is nothing here, at the moment, but me and the desert. . . . Why confuse the issue by dragging in a superfluous entity?" (208). This refutation moves Abbey beyond consideration of the sublime to something quite different. A point of contrast is Henry David Thoreau's experience at the top of Ktaadn, where he "clearly felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man" and where he feels the gravity of his own humanity slip away in the face of "this Titan that has possession of me" (78-9). If sublime experience renders Thoreau in awe of a greater power, Abbey's dissolutive

[28] The quote is from "A Passion in the Desert" of *La Comédie Humaine*. The passage actually reads, "'[I]n the desert there is all—and yet nothing.' . . . 'God is there, and man is not.'"

interrelatedness indicates a sense of joining his identity with a greater body—a sense, that is, of "feeling like a river," as he insists we must do.

The most striking aspect of this passage is its rapid fall into indistinction. Abbey gets to a moment of "blended amalgams" by transitioning first through nonverbal cues before communication becomes almost unnecessary, as muscle twitches within the same body. The boundary-less multi-entity depicted here appears to be a work in progress, never a state of being so much as a temporary state of unbeing, a momentary exercise of occupying the same body, of grasping the relationship between the two men, their reliance on each other in this canyon, in terms of a confusion as to where they—and the ecosystem of the canyon—begin and end.[29] And yet it is worth noting the final line in the long passage above. Abbey's cursory reference to their stench, and the flippant "I suppose" interjected between the "we" and the "catfish," suggests a spoof on the animal aspects of humans and a reversed, humanish self-consciousness on the part of the catfish. Abbey moves from investing catfish with human faculties to investing himself with catfishery.

If Abbey appears to savor his self-erasure in these canyon passages, he does so, very obviously, with a smirk and a wink. The line about catfish expresses an admission that of course his selfhood has not really disappeared—indeed could not have, if he later sits down to write the passage. Such an attitude reveals that Abbey treats his attention to

[29] Such a perspective suggests that Abbey's text is predictive of James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, developed with Lynn Margulis in the early 1970s, which proved influential to ecological thinking of that decade, though not without substantial criticism. The hypothesis posits that human individuals "find ourselves and all other living things to be parts and partners of a vast being who in her entirety has the power to maintain our planet as a fit and comfortable habitat for life" (Lovelock 1). Indeed, Abbey writes elsewhere that the contention that "the earth, considered whole, is a kind of living being" is "probably true," though verification of that idea requires not empirical study but "a science with room for more than data and information, a science that includes sympathy for the object under study, and more than sympathy, love" (*Down* 28-9). And in *The Journey Home*, Abbey writes, "The earth is not a mechanism but an organism, a being with its own life and its own reasons, where the support and sustenance of the human animal is incidental" (225).

his place within an ecosystem, in which at times he seems unsure where his body and sense of self begin and end, almost like a shared secret, if not like a shared condition. Recognizing that his own prized selfhood is subordinate to the ecological blender, he also accepts that he cannot dismiss his sense of self. And nor does he particularly want to.

Desert Solitaire reveals a certain ambivalence at work in the ecological commitment of a burgeoning environmental consciousness. The text's presentation of wilderness as an alternative civilization aligns it with the renewal of society based on individual fulfillment prized by the New Left. And yet Abbey understands wilderness as an interpenetrative system in which the individual ultimately plays second fiddle to flows of energy and matter, air moving in and out of the lungs and sand caught under fingernails, death and renewal. As soon as Abbey frames his wilderness as a conceptualization of interpenetrative ecological principles, his sense of authentic, rugged citizenship—of selfhood—melts away. Abbey's early commitment to risking "everything human in myself" in respect of fellow creatures proves to be as ambivalent and impossible a promise as he makes it out to be.

To feel like a river, ultimately, is to accept the indistinctness of selfhood within wilderness ecology, and simultaneously to grasp at a sense of identity that flits in and out of reach. Yet in his use of womb imagery and his emphasis on "*feeling*," Abbey perpetuates the notion that women and wilderness are cut from the same cloth, a longstanding association that Abbey complicates without dispelling. Abbey appears to view identification with the ecosystem as an *indulgence*, a feminized flight of fancy. Perhaps for this reason he continues to take such pleasure in his own perceived sense of rough,

authentic Abbey-ness, and approaches his dissolution always from the perspective of individual authenticity.

The Psychedelics of Water, Wind, and Stone

One of the most conspicuous aspects of Abbey's amniotic descent into the Colorado River canyon is his casual, almost flippant aside to the reader. "Talk about intersubjectivity," he remarks—and what about it? This sentence marks the first and only time that Abbey mentions "intersubjectivity" in *Desert Solitaire*'s three hundred pages, but he clearly finds the term indispensable to our understanding of his sudden inability to detect boundaries between himself and his environment, between the limits of his consciousness and the apparent limitlessness of the universe. The experience is almost hallucinatory. On the Colorado, Abbey and Newcomb "merged into the Group Mind and became very psychic," as Tom Wolfe wrote of the Merry Pranksters in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, published in 1968, the same year as *Desert Solitaire* (99). "Intersubjectivity!" was one slogan for Ken Kesey's well-publicized acid tests, communal trips hosted at festivals and in private homes during which Kesey's Pranksters freely distributed LSD to generate "forms of expression in which there would be no separation between himself and the audience. It would be all one experience, with all the senses opened wide" (8). There is little doubt that Abbey was familiar with the work of Kesey and his most attentive chronicler, Wolfe. Abbey references Wolfe several times in his essays, and he overlapped with Kesey under Stegner's tutelage in Stanford University's creative writing program in the late 1950s. Regardless, Abbey offers evidence that he is talking back to 60s drug culture.

In the central chapter of *Desert Solitaire*, immediately following his recitation of the law of wilderness civilization, Abbey writes of his desert post: "Noontime here is like

a drug. The light is psychedelic, the dry electric air narcotic. To me the desert is stimulating, exciting, exacting; I feel no temptation to sleep or to relax into occult dreams but rather an opposite effect which sharpens and heightens vision, touch, hearing, taste and smell" (155). Abbey's use of the word "drug" is intriguing, especially considering he later describes LSD, whose benefits he seems to be outlining, as one of "the symptoms of discontent and desperation with which most Americans are now familiar" (267). Indeed, Abbey thinks very little of the drug experiments and the individuals who orchestrated or reported on them. He refers to Wolfe and Timothy Leary as "apologists for the glossy technocracy rising around us in walls of aluminum and glass" (*Down* 83). He reflects on his own, sole LSD experiment numerous times. This experience, it seems, was a major disappointment; his journals describe the trip as an "uncomfortable and inconclusive failure: the stars quivered in a cloudy cobweb but the big spider-God failed to appear" (in Cahalan 100).

Albert Hofmann first synthesized LSD in 1938, and after he ingested the drug in 1943, he began to publicize what he believed to be its revolutionary capabilities for the human mind and society.[30] LSD inaugurated, for Leary, a "historical movement that would inevitably change man at the very center of his nature, his consciousness" (343). At the outset, these gurus approached drug experimentation as an essentially revolutionary act, intended not only to transform Western society, but also the human psyche—LSD became a chemical compound that would activate liberation, that "could free man's consciousness and bring about a new conception of man, his psychology and philosophy" (Leary 331).

The dissolutive ethos of "feeling like a river" might be said to be the environmentalist cousin of the "consciousness expansion" pursued by drug experiment

[30] Hofmann's employer Sandoz Pharmaceuticals commercially introduced the drug in 1947. The United States government prohibited it in 1968.

gurus such as Leary, Kesey, and Ram Dass. Both experiences aim at the explosion of "consciousness," of some sort of expanded apprehension of other bodies in an environmental field. And yet Abbey clearly rejects the use of drugs as worthy of producing such a heightened sense of connectivity, despite their contemporaneous celebration. The issue with LSD is that even if proponents such as Leary and Aldous Huxley thought that a principled use of psychedelics could alter consciousness to the point of social change, many practitioners were just in it for the high. The Age of Aquarius was an undisciplined experiment.

Matthiessen voices a similar objection in *The Snow Leopard*. If Abbey only implicitly associates drug states with his celebration of white-water dissolution, Matthiessen pointedly juxtaposes a joyful embrace of self-dismissal in the natural world with his disappointing participation in LSD experiments with his wife ten years earlier. Matthiessen simultaneously reprimands countercultural excess and asserts the value of minimalist wilderness habitation. Yet he also continually de-emphasizes his sense of coherent selfhood, writing early in the narrative of his time on a ship at sea in 1945: "I lost my sense of self, the heartbeat I heard was the heart of the world, I breathed with the mighty risings and declines of the earth, and this evanescence seemed less frightening than exalting" (43).

Early in *The Snow Leopard*, Matthiessen recalls his own psychedelic experiences. He reminisces about his experiments with ayahuasca in 1959, musing that, "Though frightening, the experience made clear that this family of chemicals . . . might lead to another way of seeing, and not in the slow labor of ascetic discipline but in cool efficiency and speed" (44). Matthiessen is nonetheless wary of this "way of seeing," so redolent of

Kesey's celebration of explosive intersubjectivity: "I never saw drugs as a path, far less as a way of life, but for the next ten years, I used them regularly—mostly LSD . . . here and there a blissful passage was attained that in my ignorance I took for religious experience" (44). Later, he would share this search for what he vaguely describes as a sense of wholeness, of peace—something he feels he needs but lacks—with his wife Deborah. But on her first trip, Deborah "freaks out": "She started to laugh, and her mouth opened wide and she could not close it; her armor had cracked, and all the night winds of the world went howling through. Turning to me, she saw my flesh dissolve, my head become a skull" (46). Despite the experiments' often horrific aspects, the couple continued, at times with what Matthiessen greets as success. During one trip,

> not one word had been spoken; only later did we discover that all thoughts, laughter, and emotions had been not similar but *just the same, one mind, one Mind*, even to this: that as we held each other, both bodies turned into sapling trees that flowed into each other, grew together in one strong trunk that pushed a taproot deeper and deeper into the ground. (46-7)

Yet even this "success" remains something of a disappointment, because still "an 'I' remained, aware that something-was-happening because of drugs. At no time did 'I' dissolve into the miracle."

Matthiessen, it would seem, actively desires a dismissal of selfhood in a way Abbey does not. He seems almost envious when he fondly recalls a memory in which his young son abandons his toys during the summer, and stands still, watching the birds and the trees. The boy "was not observing," but was "at rest in the very center of the universe, a part of things, unaware of endings and beginnings, still in unison with the primordial nature of creation, letting all light and phenomena pour through. Ecstasy is identity with all existence . . . there was no 'self' to separate him from the bird or flower" (41-2). Identification with

the natural world is here strongly linked to childhood and infancy, as in Abbey (and in classical psychoanalysis). This wider worldview, which possesses no central "I" to speak of, Matthiessen explains, becomes repressed. The self-consciousness attendant to maturity heralds a change, and the "armor of the 'I' begins to form, the construction and desperate assertion of separate identity, the loneliness." But Matthiessen is hopeful that "to shatter or dissolve it brings about the reunion with all universal life that mystics seek, the homegoing, the return to the lost paradise of our 'true nature'" (66). In other words, there is a way to reverse repression, to regain a lost sense of expansive selfhood, of connection, and of ecology.[31]

For Matthiessen that hidden method is ultimately more spiritual than hallucinogenic. Still seeking a sense of wholeness, he and his wife became students of Zen Buddhism in 1961. At a weekend retreat shortly thereafter, during a morning service, Matthiessen "chanted the Kannon Sutra with such fury that I 'lost' myself, forgot the self" (106). According to Matthiessen, such self-dismissal is the purpose of the sutra, and as the chanting died, "the silence swelled with the intake of my breath into a Presence of vast benevolence of which *I was a part* . . . Then I let my breath go, and gave myself up to delighted immersion in this Presence, to a peaceful *belonging*" (106). Notably, Matthiessen describes this sort of achievement as "liberation—not change, but transformation—a profound vision of . . . identity with universal life, past, present, and future" (18). He later describes this act of liberation as "the obliteration of the ego." In Tantric practice, he writes, "the student may displace the ego by filling his whole being with the real or imagined

[31] Kesey's project of "total identification," in fact, also finds its roots in his own introduction to Freudian psychoanalysis, which an acquaintance briefs for him as a prelude to Kesey's first experiment with "psychomimetic drugs" intended to produce 'temporary states resembling psychoses"—in other words, intended to inspire a mild borderline state, an amplification of oceanic feeling (Wolfe 36).

object of his concentration," and in Zen meditation, "one seeks to empty out the mind, to return it to the clear, pure stillness of a seashell or flower petal. When body and mind are one, then the whole being . . . may be laid open to the *experience* that individual existence, ego, the 'reality' of matter and phenomena are no more than fleeting and illusory arrangements of molecules" (91).

Matthiessen deploys the psychoanalytic rhetoric of ego to describe his spiritual practice and, ultimately, his engagement with the Himalayan ecosystem. By specifically likening the "empty" individual to a seashell or flower petal, Matthiessen draws lines of affinity among narcissistic expansiveness, spirituality, and artifacts of the natural world. Alan Watts similarly borrowed from the jargon of psychoanalysis to elaborate on the same spiritual and ecological themes. In *Nature, Man and Woman* (1958), he writes that the ego "is set over against nature as the dissociated soul or mind" (*Nature* 12). He also favorably cites Freud's discussion of narcissism in *Civilization and Its Discontents*—the claim that "originally the ego includes everything"—at length, and articulates a psychic dimension to biological reality that illustrates a similar commitment to ego-dismissal, in that he writes, "a world of interdependent relationships, where things are intelligible only in terms of each other, is a seamless unity" (*Nature* 4). This "seamless unity" might be rediscovered only with the abandonment of ego, which "can only strengthen its divided mode of consciousness," for which purpose Watts endorses the teachings of Zen, Tao, and other Eastern spiritual philosophies (9). This project resembles an attempt to apprehend the biological fact of ecological integration through the dissolution of selfhood.

These spiritual connections often supplemented, or were supplemented by, LSD use by more temperate users than Kesey, such as Leary and Dass, who combined Buddhism

with mind-altering hallucinogens. Dass, who preferred quieter, more introspective and spiritual experiments, in fact turns Kesey away from his East Coast retreat during the events of *The Electric Kool-Acid Test*: "It was hard enough to keep the straight multitudes from going hysterical over the subject of LSD even in the best of circumstances—let alone when it was used for manic screaming orgies in public places" (222). It is precisely this perception of excess, combined with his own disappointments, that leads Matthiessen to firmly reject the promise of LSD: "Lacking the temper of ascetic discipline, the drug vision remains a sort of dream that cannot be brought over into daily life" (47). Central to Matthiessen's refusal is his contention that drugs lack "discipline"—their result is too messy and therefore meaningless, too loose to achieve a real state of peace and belonging. Buddhism provides the basis for a calmer experience of unity within the universe.

What's more, wilderness serves Matthiessen as the locus for this transformation—solitude is spiritually desirable. Like Abbey's desert memoir, Matthiessen's travelogue is not an exercise in mimesis—a work of "nature writing"—but in identity. As Peter Bishop writes, "it would be a mistake to assume . . . that *The Snow Leopard* is factual . . . Travel writing creates worlds, it does not simply discover them" (204). Much of the action "seem[s] like a dream," and external reality "either seems like an intrusion into Matthiessen's inner reflections, or else physical things trigger off a stream of associations and send him plunging back down into the memory" (204). Like Abbey, Matthiessen is principally concerned with himself, or at least some version of himself—not with the Himalayas, but with his place among them.

The narrative of *The Snow Leopard* begins long after Matthiessen's conversion, in the winter of 1973, shortly after his wife's death, when the field biologist George Schaller

invited Matthiessen to accompany him to the then-remote Shey Gompa, the Crystal Monastery of Tibet, where Schaller would be studying the native population of *bharal* sheep.[32] The mountains represent for Matthiessen what the desert represents for Abbey: "liberation" and "freedom," "the possibility and prospect of 'free life,' traveling light, without clinging or despising, in calm acceptance of everything that comes, free because without defenses" (112). The mountains appear to Matthiessen to augment authentic selfhood, as he notes that in the cities of England, America, and Kashmir, Schaller "was a formal man who could not quite communicate his feelings," but "in the freedom of the snow mountains he is opening out in true, warm colors" (167). There is a note of self-reliance and sustainability to this celebration of selfhood. Schaller especially "feels that our journey has had the quality of adventure because we depend entirely on ourselves" (251). Ascetic discipline—of both the spiritual *and* physical variety—signify for Matthiessen a certain worthiness, a firmness of integrity that shores up the value of an individual.

And yet that same spiritual asceticism demands of its practitioner a dismissal of this same pride of selfhood. At the same time that the mountains seem to amplify the rigor and solidity of individuality, an acceptance of "everything that comes" also includes an acceptance—even an embrace—of Matthiessen's own destruction. His spiritual commitment to self-evacuation—to what he describes as embodying the "void"—amplifies in the Himalayas. At high altitudes, Matthiessen feels the ground, like a heart, almost beating

[32] As in *Desert Solitaire*, the narrative is interspersed with comments on human modification of the environment and its adverse ecological effects, especially deforestation and overgrazing, the latter of which has especially diminished the *bharal* population.

> with its own energy . . . that energy pours through me, joining my body with the sun until small silver breaths of cold, clear air, no longer mine, are lost in the mineral breathing of the mountain. A white down feather, sun-filled, dances before me on the wind: alighting nowhere: it balances on a shining thorn, goes spinning on. Between this white feather, sheep dung, light, and the fleeting aggregate of atoms that is "I," there is no particle of difference. . . I grow into these mountains like a moss. (232)

Just before he leaves the Shey monastery, preparing for his return journey, he intuits that "the dying grass, the notes of southbound birds in the mountain sky are no more fleeting than the rock itself, no more so and no less—all is the same. The mountain withdraws into stillness, my body dissolves into the sunlight, tears fall that have nothing to do with 'I'" (248). Matthiessen's comment on his "fleeting aggregate of atoms" emphasizes the cyclical characteristics of ecology, a point underscored by his inclusion even of feces on his list of interacting elements.

This sort of representation of the intersection of spiritual self-renunciation with ecological forces appears even more explicitly in the works of Gary Snyder.[33] In "The Yogin and the Philosopher," the first essay of *The Old Ways* (1977), Snyder writes, "We live in a universe, 'one turn' in which, it is widely felt, all is one and at the same time all is many. The extra rooster and I were subject and object until one evening we became one" (9). To be like a yogin is to experience this "deep sense of communion and communication with nature and with specific non-human beings"—a function Snyder also attributes to poets and philosophers (13). This aesthetic knowledge "helps us know the Self," Snyder writes, by forcibly suggesting "that we are all composite beings . . . whose sole individual identifying feature is a particular form or structure changing constantly in time. There is

[33] Despite the fact that Abbey joked with Snyder that he admired his work "except for all that Zen and Hindu bullshit" (*Abbey's Road* xvi), Snyder believed he was joking, and wrote as much in his tribute after Abbey's death—and indeed, Abbey remained fascinated by Zen spirituality, even if he did not write on it, according to his good friend John De Puy (Cahalan 137).

no ‘self’ to be found in that, and yet oddly enough, there is” (63-4). Snyder intends this line to refer to both psychical and physical transformations, bringing together the expansive and incoherent selfhood of the non-ego and the transmissions of energy and matters among life forms in an ecosystem. And yet he points to the paradox in this formulation. Despite these movements among entities, there exists a coherent self to recognize its own formlessness over time. He attempts to resolve this problem by presenting it as a matter of repression. The co-existence of an ego and a repressed unconscious. And like Bookchin, Snyder calls on the notion of spontaneity as a feature of ecological interconnectivity, and also of the repressed, expansive self: “As the discriminating, self-centered awareness of civilized man has increasingly improved his material survival potential, it has correspondingly moved him farther and farther from a spontaneous feeling of being part of the natural world” (9). Spontaneity here has been repressed with the development of the ego. Far from expressing merely the mechanism of ecological proliferation, spontaneity, for these writers, is intrinsically bound up with wellbeing and self-fulfillment, much as it was for practitioners of humanist psychology who popularized the term during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s as what Abraham Maslow refers to in *Towards a Psychology of Being* (1962) as a “being-value,” part and parcel of the functionality of “Aliveness.”

Matthiessen describes the phenomenon of “identity with all existence” as a “spontaneous identity with the object,” making use of the same vocabulary as Bookchin and Snyder.[34] And yet he also frequently represents these moments as almost physically violent disruptions of his sense of self: “Left alone, I am overtaken by that northern void—no wind, no cloud, no track, no bird . . . This stillness to which all returns, this is reality . .

[34] He writes of his time in the Himalayan wilderness: “I respond to things spontaneously, without defensive or self-conscious screens” (115).

. such transience and insignificance are exalting, terrifying, all at once, like the sudden discovery, in meditation, of one's own transparence" (173). This passage reads as a beatific, even joyous celebration of what Terry Gifford refers to as the antipastoral, the "repetition of natural violence . . . the neutrality of a nature that cannot be invested with that long list of pastoral comforts" (117-9). Rather than fear the pointlessness or indifference of biological infinitude—an anxiety akin to Dillard's discomfort in the face of "fecundity"—Matthiessen suggests we might embrace it. The naked peaks "serve as a mirror to one's own true being, utterly still, utterly clear, a void, an Emptiness without life or sound that carries in Itself all life, all sound." And later, he expresses a keen desire to be ripped apart by the earth: "If only [the mountains] would fly apart, consume us in a fire of white light" (235). The hint of glee lurking in these words is present also in Wolfe's depiction of an acid trip: "The *experience* of the barrier between the subjective and the objective, the personal and the impersonal, the *I* and the *not-I* disappearing . . . that *feeling!*" (40).

And yet Matthiessen laments that, just as for his drug saga, "as long as I remain an 'I' who is conscious of the void and stands apart from it, there will remains a snow mist on the mirror" (174). As the narrative progresses, Matthiessen increasingly suggests that, spiritually, he is "not ready" for such a radical dissolution: "I resist, in fear of losing my death grip on the world, on all that provides the illusion of security. The same fear . . . can occur with the hallucinogenic drugs: familiar things, losing the form assigned to them, begin to spin, and the center does not hold, because we search for it outside instead of in" (235). Matthiessen seems to suggest that a true experience of intersubjectivity might require that all individuals involved must experience dissolution together, as the drug gurus

tried to encourage. This goal would appear unattainable, however, given that, as Abbey and Matthiessen both show, the dismissal of the ego requires an ego-position from which to dismiss itself. It is a profoundly individual imaginative act. Just as his wife displayed a radically different reaction to LSD—one that did not suggest anything like an intersubjective merger—Schaller does not share Matthiessen's spiritual vision, and so the latter finds himself painfully aware that despite what he feels, he only experiences unity in nature alone. The *bharal* certainly do not reciprocate his enthusiastic self-destruction.

Furthermore, Matthiessen discovers—painfully, for his own sake—that, fiction or not, his ego re-asserts itself, time and again. If Matthiessen were not Matthiessen after 1973—if the earth had torn him apart—*The Snow Leopard* would not exist. The writing of nonfiction that considers the place of the self in relation to ecology would appear to be an anguished announcement of being caught between an inability to connect with other creatures, and an almost gleeful sense of self-dismissal, a recognition of the continuation of one's own energy and matter in the ecosystem.

And yet what both Matthiessen and Abbey suggest, in feeling like a river, is that an imaginative act of dissolution in the natural world becomes a sort of viable alternative, to entertain an expansive, unified identity, to what they see as the excesses of drug use. Both writers contemplate Watts' suggestion that "[i]f the ego were to disappear, or rather, to be seen as a useful fiction, there would no longer be the duality of subject and object, experiencer and experience. There would simply be a continuous, self-moving stream of experiencing, without the sense either of an active subject who controls it or of a passive subject who suffers it" (*Nature* 70). Both writers seem to suggest that the ego is a "useful fiction"—one in which both men in fact take great pride. It is because they view themselves

as so ascetically disciplined that they believe themselves worthy of a deeper relationship with the natural world in which they become insignificant. Abbey identifies this paradox at the very beginning of *Desert Solitaire*.

As such, Abbey and Matthiessen demonstrate that the self's dissolution is itself at best an enabling fiction, an imaginative conception of ecological interpenetration that fails when approached as a project of selfhood. The cultivation of an ecological consciousness, for these writers, necessarily disrupts the strength of each man's ego, which they find necessary to fulfill the ascetic capacities required for such a consciousness to begin with. Dissolution would appear to be some kind of work in progress, unachievable until death itself—a fact Matthiessen reflects on throughout *The Snow Leopard*, in negotiating his grief at his wife's death and his wonder at his ecological insignificance. Both writers do disrupt the notion of an authentic ego as it is valued at the time, including by many proponents of ecological and environmental reform, and by Abbey and Matthiessen themselves. But this concern is, ironically, largely ego-centric. Like the major figures of the New Left, both men are primarily concerned with their *individual* authenticity, a privileged position that becomes complicated by the rise of cultural authenticity and identity politics.

CHAPTER 3

The Universal Wilderness: *Song of Solomon*'s Skeptical State of Nature

Ultimately nature rules. That is the great democratic gift the earth offers us—that sweet death to which we all inevitably go—into that final communion. No race, no class, no gender, nothing can keep any of us from dying into that death where we are made one.

bell hooks, "Earthbound: On Solid Ground"

. . . particularity can never be simply left behind or obliterated. The notion of escaping from it into a realm of entirely universal maxims which belong to man as such . . . is an illusion and an illusion with painful consequences.

Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*

On 17 September 1970, the United States Court of Appeals of California heard suit brought by the Sierra Club against Walt Disney Enterprises, which planned to develop a valley in the southern Sierra range of California as a ski resort. The court ruled that because the Sierra Club was not itself injured by the corporation, it had no legal basis for litigation. The case was appealed to the Supreme Court in 1971. In preparation, Christopher Stone developed an argument for the preservation of the valley based on his contention that if the Sierra Club could not claim injury, *something* could. Natural objects, he reasoned, have needs that are damaged by human industry. Stone argued for the extension of rights to trees by ethical expansion: "Originally each man had regard only for himself and those of a very narrow circle about him," but rights have since been extended—"imperfectly"—to "prisoners, aliens, women . . . the insane, Blacks, fetuses, and Indians" (3-4).

A number of similar commitments to nonhuman rights and interests arose beginning in the 1960s, culminating in significant legal milestones such as the Wilderness Act of 1964 and Endangered Species Act of 1973. Ideas and texts such as Richard Ryder's "speciesism," Richard and Val Routley's "human chauvinism," and Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983) came to comprise a postwar ethics maintaining that the

nonhuman and/or nature as a whole have intrinsic value and possess rights of their own. These philosophers typically drew on and applied to nonhuman elements the natural rights tradition of political philosophy, a universalist lineage that "posits the existence of an immutable human nature that, while its manifestation in different people involves variations across culture, genetics, upbringing, race, gender, and historical context, is nevertheless fixed" (Oderberg 376). By 1989, Roderick Nash would write that "natural rights has indeed evolved into the rights of nature," even if "human-to-human ethics have not been entirely clarified" (*Rights* 7). The introduction of ecology to mainstream discourse provided fuel for these conversations, and as descriptive models of the earth changed, so did environmentalists' deployment of natural rights philosophy.

Like Stone, many of these writers rhetorically invoked racial, ethnic, or tribal identity to strengthen cases against environmental degradation. Comparisons between landscape and slave enjoyed a special prominence. In 1975, Ryder commented, "When we examine the arguments used by slave-owners in the past, we can see a striking similarity with the view expressed today by those who defend the exploitation of animals" (12). Aldo Leopold takes the "enslavement" of the earth (635) as a point of departure in "The Conservation Ethic" (1933), and Edward Abbey writes that Glen Canyon and the Colorado River had themselves been "sold. Down the river" (*Desert Solitaire* 174). Theodore Roszak describes nature as a "downtrodden nigger" (*Person/Planet*), and Wendell Berry writes that "[i]f we begin by making niggers of people, we have ended by making a nigger of the world" (*Unsettling* 12). A member of the Animal Liberation Front described the organization's mission "like the Underground Railroad" (in Malni). Nash, who compares Rachel Carson to Harriet Beecher Stowe, considers biocentrism and animal rights latter-

day analogues to abolitionism, both of whose proponents became "spokespersons for the rights of an oppressed and largely silent minority that they perceived to differ greatly from themselves" (*Rights* 205). These comparisons provide only a few examples of rhetoric utilized by a number of rights-based environmental activists in the 1970s.

Such arguments have experienced criticism in recent years, especially for their implicit reiteration of old equations of racial and ethnic minorities and the land. As Sarah Jaquette Ray writes,

> The combination of being so long viewed as "closer to nature"—whether in negative terms as "backward" or in positive terms as "noble savages"—and having their social and cultural agendas often overridden in the name of the environment has led Native American, African American, and Latino/a communities to distrust environmentalists. (24)

On the one hand, these comparisons bespeak a sort of efflorescence of civil rights momentum. On the other, the flattening of African Americans and trees has been interpreted as reflecting the sort of racial reductionism Toni Morrison describes as the continued "document[ation of] the routine bestiality of those who had founded and settled this country" ("Rediscovering" 46).

Morrison's work consistently takes up two themes related to this sort of equation: the subversion of wilderness both as an analogue for black savagery and as an environment hostile to black individuals; and a distrust of racial essentialism as the basis for individual subjectivity, community, or politics. In *Song of Solomon* (1977), Morrison brings these threads together. She recasts a seemingly inhospitable wilderness as a space of inclusion, and frames an experience of self-dissolution perceived by her protagonist Milkman as a rejection of the essentialist racial authenticity championed by other characters in the novel. Fleeing various "demands" made on him by family and friends in Michigan, Milkman

travels south in search of gold and ultimately family history, eventually stopping in Appalachian Virginia. There, beneath a sweet-gum tree, "Milkman's self—the cocoon that was his 'personality'—gave way. . . . He was only his breath, coming slower now, and his thoughts. The rest of him had disappeared" (277). For Milkman, the forest comes to represent interconnectivity as a condition common to all individuals, regardless of race, gender, class, or even species. The novel foregrounds ecology, represented by Milkman's diffuse experience in this remote locale, as a force that destabilizes the factionalism of identity politics, positing instead a materially universal basis for human subjectivity. As Wes Berry notes, this moment seems almost out of step with "what we expect from African American writers—namely, narratives that reinforce the importance of asserting and gaining subjectivity" (163). Morrison is no doubt aware of her defiance of expectations, if such expectations can even be summed up as crisply as Berry presents them. Her departure, such as it is, reads more as a criticism than an affirmation. As I will argue, the wilderness device offers a dual critique of the sorts of arguments that offer up racial authenticity as a fixed and unifying basis for identity, and of romantically universalizing representations of wilderness itself.

Morrison's novel appears on the heels of a fertile period of cultural-nationalist resistance to assimilation and consolidation of authenticity along "fixed, given channels of fellowship" (Rossinow, *Politics* 343), what Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton heralded in 1967 as a "new consciousness among black people" (xvi) necessary "to reclaim our history and our identity" (34). Morrison herself prefers to avoid the idiom of "the black community . . . because it came to mean something much different in the sixties and seventies, as though we had to forge one—but it had seemed to me that it was always there"

(Morrison and Stepto 474). She reflects fondly on the neighborhood of her youth, when "[w]e thought little about 'unity' because we loved those differences among us. Yet we had rent parties that were truer manifestations of community love and sharing than any slogan ever invented for us" ("Rediscovering" 50). What Melanie T. Price refers to as modern Black Nationalism's "increased cultural production in the form of 'authentic' black rituals and traditions" (23) seems to Morrison an expression of "political expediency" that "ran roughshod over some valuable and tender roots" ("Rediscovering" 42). For Morrison, even the dangerous aspects of the African American past are valuable, and "at risk of being lost" amid certain Afrocentric projects to "create" an African American culture, to "rush to move away from the past" (Denard xviii). Literature offers the opportunity to recover and represent history "as life lived" ("Behind" 36-7).

Affiliation, for Morrison, does not signify some inherent cohesion, but comprises "all sorts of voices, each of which is profoundly different. Because what strikes me about African American culture *is* its variety" (Morrison et al.). Her affection for the particular bespeaks a suspicion of claims to universality she nonetheless plots in her characters. She writes, "Even when I'm talking about universal concepts, I try to see how people, such as myself, would look at these universal concepts, how they would respond to them" (Tate 168). Significantly, ecology appears to be one concept to which Morrison does affix a certain generic importance. Commenting on "global changes in terrain and weather that can radically alter human environment" and "the impact of over-distributed humans on natural resources," she makes clear her coalitional stance on safeguarding future generations ("Future" 173). Mitigating environmental crisis and species extinction—and in so doing preserving humanity as a project in itself—requires "thinking about generations

to come as more than a century or so of one's own family line, group stability, gender, sex, race, religion" (174). Morrison's view seems to be that factional politics, while potentially politically useful in the short term, are of little consequence, and possibly harmful, to ensuring the future of our species. In her fiction, however, a condition like ecology would not seem nearly as important as the perceptions, actions, and relations it engenders, despite its assumed or potential universal applicability.

Morrison is particularly skeptical of the "'universal' yearnings" that characterize "Young America" (*Playing* 33), precisely because the putatively ubiquitous "rights of man . . . upon which the nation was founded" exist in counterbalance to "the hierarchy of race" (38). The "constituted Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery" Morrison observes in early American texts "provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity" (*Playing* 44). Throughout American literary history, romantic protagonists have paradoxically conquered that state of nature while embracing it, seizing it from unworthy savages. Morrison's reservations toward this idea at the very least complicate appraisals of the dissolution scene described above that read Milkman's "experiences hunting as an ennobling tradition through which a community can reconnect itself to a primeval state 'before language'" (Wallace & Armbruster 224). Despite the benignly egalitarian appearance of such a state of nature, Morrison is acutely aware of how this idea has been discursively manufactured and mediated throughout American history. She critiques the construction of this antediluvian theme directly in *A Mercy* (2008) as it manifests in the white Jacob Vaark's vista of "forests untouched since Noah, shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears, wild food for the taking" upon his arrival in the New World (12). The "primal encounters" that "form the backbone of the classic American literary

canon" figure freedom in the pastoral mode, "in terms of man's ability to master the natural environment" (Hutchison 123), a tradition Morrison consistently critiques throughout her oeuvre.

As many critics note, wilderness writ large has typically been represented as "white wilderness" (DeLuca and Demo), resulting in "the long-standing assumption that the environmental movement 'belongs' to upper-middle-class or elite Anglo constituencies" (Gottlieb 240). As Carolyn Finney writes, "The dominant environment narrative in the United States is primarily constructed and informed by white, Western European, or Euro-American, voices" and "the linkage of wilderness to whiteness, wherein both become naturalized and universalized" (3, 28). Similarly, Paul Outka has argued that nationalistic and literary sentiment surrounding wilderness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries explicitly exoticized, excluded, or romanticized the slavery of blacks. The "terrible historical legacy of making people of color signify the natural, as a prelude to exploiting both . . . inevitably makes the possibility of an *uncomplicated* union with the natural world less readily available to African Americans than it has been to whites" (Outka 3), and has made of nature a terrain often considered "white and hostile" (Finney 9). According to this interpretation, what begins as an identification of other with nature transforms into a narrative of white domestication founded on the retroactive establishment of universal principles of freedom denied to that very other.

The location of liberty in an idealized nature no doubt informs other critics who have viewed wilderness as a place of black freedom and refuge contrasted with the fenced plantation, a "broad geographical metaphor for search, discovery, and achievement of self" (Dixon 4), an "alternative space," passage into which "is but one step toward the recovery

of wholeness" of "individual and group identity" (5). But as Kathleen Wallace and Karla Armbruster write, "The construction of nature as refuge so prominent in mainstream environmental thought simply does not hold true for Morrison's characters" (215). In *Beloved* (1987) characters associate lynching with trees themselves; in *A Mercy*, Florens finds in the New World wilderness a hostility painted by unfriendly, watching eyes. And in *Song of Solomon*, Macon and Pilate experience an acute fear of being hunted in the wilderness as children: "every leaf that the wind lifted, every rustle of a pheasant hen in a clump of ryegrass, sent needles of fear through their veins. . . . all the affectionate things that had peopled their lives ever since they were born became ominous signs of a presence that was searching for them" (168). What these moments have in common is that in each instance wilderness derives its terror from human presence (Macon and Pilate's surroundings had after all housed "affectionate things" in better days). Wilderness is never pure, untouched, or neutral: "experiences of nature, wilderness, and even wildness are profoundly mediated by cultural interpretations and priorities" (Wallace & Armbruster 215). Morrison's interest in representing the personal rather than the universal, coupled with her characters' interactions with nonhuman creatures, "reminds us that, as culturally and historically positioned subjects, we all identify with particular constructions of nature; our perceptions and valuations of nature are not simply 'natural' responses to the green world but responses that rest on underlying racial politics" (225).

While "a history of slavery may influence black attitudes toward nature," there is often a "heightened awareness" of environmental issues among black communities due to direct exposure to environmental harm (Finney 9). This awareness has served as the basis for both ecofeminist and environmental justice positions and movements, which focus

attention toward "a constitutive link between intrahuman oppression and ecological violence" (Outka 5). The black liberation theologian James Cone has recently summarized this position. "People who fight against white racism but fail to connect it to the degradation of the earth are anti-ecological—whether they know it or not," just as those "who struggle against environmental degradation but do not incorporate in it a disciplined and sustained fight against white supremacy are racists—whether they acknowledge it or not" (138). This sort of argument, aligning African American with environment, has been made about *Song of Solomon* in the past, so that the narrative appears to link "characters' self-hatred and angry confusion" to "a historic dispossession and to a psyche cut off from ancestral or communal wellsprings; their narratives chart a moving and powerful repossession of selfhood, articulating personal well-being in terms of the collective" (Grewal 63). As this comment illustrates, to craft an identification between minority identity and ecology through mutual oppression is also frequently, though not always, to reiterate the equation of racial or ethnic identity with the land.

It would be a mistake to say that *Song of Solomon* draws similar lines of affinity between black people and the earth. To the contrary, because Milkman's dissolutive experience represents wilderness as a universalizing environment, the novel declines to paint black individuals as wild savages, primitivist gurus, or even likewise endangered. Instead, the scene suggests that ecology, represented as wilderness, is a condition binding *all* organisms, regardless of race. But one of the reasons for which I begin this chapter with a discussion of rights-of-nature discourse is to point out that one possible interpretation of its narrative is instructive of the pitfalls of such a universalist position taken up as the basis for subjectivity. As Nash notes, rights-based ethics in classical American liberalism has

functioned for the protection of individual lives against "aggregates" such as institutions and majorities. While environmental rights activists and philosophers have aimed to expand the circle of rights to include animals and in some cases even plants and minerals, notions of ethical holism, biocentrism, and deep ecology "led the most radical moral philosophers of recent times to conclusions that devalued the individual life relative to the integrity, diversity, and continuation of the ecosystem" (*Rights* 160). The more holistically ecological one's perspective, the less persons themselves tend to matter. One senses an analogous contradiction in the logic animating claims that Milkman's expansive experience of wilderness dissolution somehow represents access to a supposedly truer self. The more his sense of self fades, the less of an individual he is. It would also be a mistake, then, to say that the novel presents such universalism as a viable antidote to the racial essentialism proselytized by Milkman's friend Guitar.

Milkman finds himself caught between two essentializing and self-erasing forces, one particular and one universal, one racial and one ecological. If the novel refuses to endorse the identitarianism that forms the basis of Guitar's racial politics, it also critiques the universalizing romance of a state of nature for both its indifference toward individuals and its pastoral construction. In the next section, I will explore how Milkman, who struggles with feelings of incoherence, experiences his dissolution in the wilderness as an expression of natural, unified identity. The novel positions his experience in opposition to Guitar's murderous factionalism. I then demonstrate how Milkman's initial enthusiasm toward this ostensibly inclusive state of nature is itself based on his pastoral tendencies, which find expression throughout the novel in terms of a chauvinistic instrumentalism reflected in Milkman's narcissistic reduction of the women in his life (especially his aunt

Pilate) to their “natural” functions—namely, their usefulness to him. The chapter ends with a consideration of the novel’s only solid conviction regarding identity, that the community built among *Song of Solomon*’s characters rests not on innate characteristics, but on mutual construction.

Dissolution and Racial Identitarianism

The sweet-gum episode mentioned above serves as the climax of a hunting trip Milkman takes late in *Song of Solomon* with the townsfolk of Shalimar, his ancestral home, after he has arrived in search of gold allegedly stashed by Pilate. Falling behind, he pauses to rest beneath the tree, and there, “Under the moon, on the ground, alone, with not even the sound of the baying dogs to remind him that he was with other people, his self—the cocoon that was ‘personality’—gave way”:

> He could barely see his own hand, and couldn’t see his feet. He was only his breath, coming slower now, and his thoughts. The rest of him had disappeared. So the thoughts came, unobstructed by other people, by things, even by the sight of himself. There was nothing to help him—not his money, his car, his father’s reputation, his suit, or his shoes. In fact they hampered him. Except for his broken watch, and his wallet with about two hundred dollars, all he had started out with on his journey was gone . . . His watch and his two hundred dollars would be of no help out here, where all a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use. (277)

This scene reads as a pivotal moment in the novel’s plot. Shortly after Milkman’s sense of selfhood appears to fade, he narrowly escapes an attempt on his life. Throwing off Guitar’s garrote, he gasps, “But it was a living breath this time, not a dying one” (279). In this moment, the bourgeois trappings of his father’s industry are stripped away, and all he had “was what he was born with.” The passage leads the reader to believe that Milkman has accessed something essential to himself.

Frequently, this scene is treated almost as the novel's conclusion, as well as the apex of self-discovery. The line about his "living breath" suggests that this scene depicts a moment of transformation, of life triumphing over death, or of spirit over degeneracy, what John Duvall refers to as "a movement from alienation to authenticity" (89). Evelyn Schreiber likewise describes Morrison's characters' "struggle to discover a unique self. In their search for knowledge of who they are as individuals, they long for the protection, safety, and love that will preserve a singular 'self'" (65). In an interview, Morrison does suggest that "Milkman has to experience the elements. . . . When he walks the earth, he feels a part of it, and that is his coming of age, the beginning of his ability to connect with the past and perceive the world as alive" (LeClair). I would argue, however, that the operative word in this last sentence is "beginning." In many cases, critics focus on this strange scene of dissolution as a final consolidation of identity, one component of a quest based not on material gain "but the dismantling of [Milkman's] personality," to the end of acquiring knowledge about himself and his family (Allen 31). These perspectives share a paradoxical equation of self-coherence, racial or family history, and dissolution, and fail to consider exactly how Milkman's sense of selfhood dissolving translates into anything like a "unique self." Such accounts treat this moment as the point at which the forest mystically fixes Milkman's broken personality even as he seems to feel that personality give way. I would argue instead that the scene in fact appears to subordinate Milkman's sense of self to the rhythms of the forest.

The critics above could be said to have fallen for the same myth as Milkman himself. In the woods, he believes he brackets his true and integral identity off from his social identity, after having anxiously fixated on what he feels to be a lack of self-coherence

throughout the novel. Studying his reflection, he notes that "[h]e had a fine enough face. Eyes women complimented him on, a firm jaw line, splendid teeth. Taken apart, it looked all right. . . . But it lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self. It was all very tentative, the way he looked" (69). His concern belies the posture of masculine swagger he adopts on the street. He tries to hide a congenital limp with "the strut of a very young man trying to appear more sophisticated than he was" (62), and takes pains to maintain an air of "masculine flippancy" (96). His sister Magdalena indirectly calls attention to the inefficacy of his performance when she interprets his defense of his mother against his father's abuse not as filial love but as paternalistic coup: "'You were taking over'" (215). In hindsight, Lena's words draw attention to the emptiness of Milkman's action. The "snorting, horse-galloping glee as old as desire" that he feels after he punches his father heralds "[i]nfinite possibilities and enormous responsibilities . . . but he was not prepared to take advantage of the former, or accept the burden of the latter" (68). The novel consistently characterizes Milkman in terms of such aimless, frenetically useless momentum, coupled with self-absorbed disinterest; when his family makes demands of him he "felt abused" (123). His malaise reads like the complaint of teenage angst from the mouth of a man in his mid-thirties: "Boredom, which had begun as a mild infection, now took over him completely. No activity seemed worth doing, no conversation worth having" (90). Morrison herself understands the character as "a man running away from some obligations and himself" (Morrison et al.), of a piece with what she perceives as the "outward" "rhythm of [men's] lives" (Morrison and McKay 417), a masculine impulse with often destructive effects. Milkman himself interprets his aimlessness as a lack of fulfillment, while ignoring the effects of his careless masculine veneer.

Guitar ambivalently attempts to solve this problem by scrutinizing what he considers his friend's absence of racial consciousness. Milkman, he suggests, cannot handle racial pressure. When he asks Milkman what he would do if he lived in Montgomery, Alabama, instead of Michigan, Milkman replies, "'Buy a plane ticket.'" This answer, Guitar believes, indicates that Milkman now "know[s] something about yourself you didn't know before: who you are and what you are" (104). Guitar tellingly appraises Milkman based on "who you are and what you are," on an intrinsic definition of self. He elaborates on this conception of identity in a passage of misogynist invective, which he directs toward a remarkably specific desire he detects in women. Women, he says,

> "want your living life. . . . It's the condition our condition is in. Everybody wants the life of a black man. Everybody. White men want us dead or quiet—which is the same thing as dead. White women, same thing. They want us, you know, 'universal,' human, no 'race consciousness.' Tame, except in bed. They want a little racial loincloth in the bed. But outside the bed they want us to be individuals." (222)

As Guitar masculinizes racial consciousness, he identifies a combination of the "universal" and "individual" against which he sets it. The last few sentences of this passage refer specifically to white women, but these inclinations, Guitar seems to suggest, join women and whites in common support for a black man divorced from racial consciousness. His simultaneous disparagement of the "individual" and "universal" dismisses the notion of a subject supposedly founded on global standards of equality in favor of a black man marked by his race's oppression and assumed tribal coherence.

These views manifest in Guitar's participation in the Seven Days, the novel's local Black Nationalist body, insofar as the shadowy organization aligns with what William L. Van Deburg calls the "nationalist confraternity" of the disparate, "sprawling expanse of the nationalist family tree" (4)—less a centrally organized movement than a plethora of

variously committed groups collectively dedicated to "revolutionary advances in the area of black self-determination" (5). The black nationalist context clarifies the vision of authenticity Guitar affixes to racial identity throughout *Song of Solomon*. Guitar's involvement with the Seven Days answers Malcolm X's charge, in light of the "[o]ver 5,000 Afro-Americans . . . lynched since the Emancipation Proclamation," that "the African American people insure ourselves that justice is done—whatever the price and *by any means necessary*" (112-3). The Days' brand of Black Nationalism premises itself not on cultural production, but on the numerical equalization of fixed and opposed identities, on equality taken to a mathematical and murderous extreme. The black vigilante group randomly executes whites "as indifferent[ly] as rain" every time a black person is killed to keep "the ratio the same" (154-5). The Days premise their mission on a system of justice that treats racial lives as a matter of calculation, as equal percentages opposing one another on a balance sheet. Their motives are perversely utilitarian: "'the only thing left to do is balance it . . . I help keep the numbers the same'" (154). Guitar's calculations comprise a twisted population mechanics based on vengeance as well as justice.

The Days' conception of naturalness, in terms of homicide and manslaughter, derives from mechanical balance rather than from individual welfare or even profit. In contrast to the Days' judgment of white-on-white murder as a form of madness, the men take pride in the assumption that "members of their own race killed one another for good reasons: violation of another's turf . . . ; refusal to obey the laws of hospitality . . . ; or verbal insults impugning their virility, honesty, humanity, and mental health" (100). It is significant that despite the "lunatic" nature of white killings, Guitar nonetheless does consider such madness to be innate. "'It doesn't matter who'" has killed a black man,

Guitar says. "'Each and every one of them could do it. . . . There are no innocent white people, because every one of them is a potential nigger-killer, if not an actual one'" (155). Guitar elucidates his understanding of race not through an idea or ideal of blackness, but through his conception of whiteness. Wanton murder is an ingrained, essential trait in whites: "'The disease they have is in their blood, in the structure of their chromosomes'" (157). Even homicide itself becomes a matter of authenticity. The Days "believed the crimes they committed were legitimate because they were committed in the heat of passion" (100). The legitimating "heat of passion" driving murderous justice recalls the premium placed on spontaneity by the ecological and psychological writers mentioned in the previous chapter. The Days justify their retaliation against whites not only in terms of calculation but also by appealing to the spontaneous spirit of the act.

Guitar emphasizes community, but he homogenizes it, decontextualizes it, and views each person not as an individual but as a nearly insignificant component of a larger racial body. "'What I'm doing isn't about hating white people,'" he explains to Milkman. "'It's about loving us. About loving you. My whole life is love'" (159). His words ironically reiterate a perspective the Days perceive in their enemies, such as one member's white ex-wife: "he lived with her for six years until he came home to find her with another man. Another black man. And when he discovered that his white wife loved not only him, not only this other black man, but the whole race, he sat down, closed his mouth, and never said another word" (128-9). The striking similarity between these two passages draws attention to the novel's critical stance toward the Seven Days' rigid conception of racial identity and membership, as well as the contradictions that structure the organization's position. Morrison frames the organization as a violent caricature of racial identity.

Guitar's rhetoric detaches love from individuals and applies it to race, an intention of which Milkman is skeptical enough to question (prophetically, it will turn out) Guitar's promise that "'[w]e don't off Negros'" (161). When Guitar begins to hunt Milkman through Pennsylvania and Virginia in later chapters, he does so because he believes Milkman to have betrayed his cause, rendering him not-quite-Negro-enough to subsume his interests to those of the race in its assumed homogeneity. Following the two men's attempted theft of gold allegedly stashed in Pilate's house, Milkman skips town. Guitar assumes Milkman has located and taken the gold for himself, and interprets this seizure as a form of race betrayal. The needs of the race as a whole supersede any claim to ownership or inheritance: "'you ripped *us* off! You are fuckin with our work!'" (297).[35] Either Milkman is loyal to the race via the Days, or he isn't. Guitar sees no middle ground.

Significantly, the novel presents Milkman's dissolutive experience beneath the sweet-gum in pointed opposition to Guitar's violent racial essentialism. The tree itself seems to save Milkman from assassination, though at the time Milkman senses little distinction between himself and tree: "Feeling both tense and relaxed, he sank his fingers into the grass. He tried to listen with his fingertips, to hear what, if anything, the earth had to say, and it told him quickly that someone was standing behind him"—Guitar with a garrote (279). Milkman's movement from urban restlessness to being "exhilarated by simply walking the earth" (279) would appear to "celebrat[e] redemptive intimacy and affinity with the natural environment" (Terry 133). Among the Shalimar townsfolk, Milkman feels "connected as through there was some cord or pulse of information they

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[35] Despite his own wish for the cash, Guitar continually subordinates his personal plans to what he presents as the needs of the race: "'I need the bread. . . Not *me. Us*'" (225). The text's interplay of *me* and *us* draws attention to Guitar's rhetorical tendency to represent himself as an "us," insofar as he represents his own self-interests as conterminous with the interests of a broader racial identity.

shared" (292-3). Listening to the communication between hunters and dogs, Milkman comes to understand their movements as

> language. . . . No, it was not language; it was what there was before language. Before things were written down. Language in the time when men and animals did talk to one another . . . And if they could talk to animals, and the animals could talk to them, what didn't they know about human beings? Or the earth itself, for that matter. It was more than tracks Calvin was looking for—he whispered to the trees, whispered to the ground, touched them, as a blind man caresses a page of Braille, pulling meaning through his fingers. (278)

The forest signifies a shared order, which Milkman's mother Ruth earlier defines as "wilderness where there was system, or the logic of lions, trees, toads, and birds" (138). And Milkman significantly perceives this system as originary, predating socially mediated identities. Within this state of nature, he perceives a universal character among all species most immediately at the level of communication but also, implicitly, at the level of ontology, in terms of "what he was born with." The dogs, hunters, trees, "the earth itself, for that matter," all seem to share some essential aspect, a mutual relation among every organism, even the "ground," that renders communication and existence universal and egalitarian.

But because of the self-erasure that accompanies this perception, the universal experience does not ultimately provide any real challenge to Guitar's totalizing essentialism. Milkman finds himself between two alternatives that propose to mend the cracks he perceives in his self-identity. Both of these positions, however, demarcate cohesion not at the level of the individual, but at the level of a collective that eliminates the self. And the sort of boundary-blurring Milkman experiences in the forest appears throughout Morrison's corpus in relation to an uncritically romantic conception of wilderness. In *A Mercy*, Florens "shelter[s] in wilderness" despite the invisible, musky

creatures that tail her (42). Florens' experience, like Milkman's, seems to echo Vaark's pride in self-reliance earlier in the novel, and yet, "as a young female slave stepping forth alone . . . but coping nonetheless, it is now Florens who seems to embody the attributes of the self-reliant pioneer" (Terry 137). But hers is a different brand of exploration: "'I am loose to do what I choose,'" Florens says (69-70), a declaration that "suggests an instance of being unregulated or unbounded" (Terry 138). As I will demonstrate in the next section, Morrison is suspicious of any celebration of such an "unbounded" sensation. *Song of Solomon* specifically elucidates her skepticism in terms of Milkman's treatment of both places and people as pastoral retreats.

Pilate and the Pastoral

Guitar's conviction that whites' inclination toward senseless violence "is in their blood" perpetuates a preoccupation throughout the novel with an uneasy distinction characters draw between what people are and what they do. Different characters tend to define individuals based on one or the other criteria. Guitar defines people by who or what he believes they are. Whites are inherently mad, blacks inherently rational. His conception of personhood turns on an essential understanding about who or what kind of person an individual is. The distinction between these two perspectives plays out early in the novel in a conversation between Milkman's father Macon and his young sister First Corinthians. Macon defines individuals not by what they are, but by what they do, and more specifically what they buy or can buy. He convinces himself that blacks will buy summer homes if he offers them because "'[w]hite people do it all the time'" (34). After Corinthians insists that "'Negroes don't like the water,'" he responds, "'They'll like it if they own it.'" Corinthians does not accept her father's logic. She announces, regarding a local bar owner, "'I don't

care what she owns. I care about what she is'" (34). If Guitar and Corinthians' position appears to endorse a vision of racial authenticity, Macon's measures individuals' worth by their accumulation of capital, by actions taken from an assumed position of equality. Macon's industriousness is a twisted reflection of black self-reliance, an "homage to his own father's life and death" through respect of "property, good solid property, the bountifulness of life . . . distorted . . . for the sake of gain" (300). Given Macon's often cruel adherence to liberal individualism, it is remarkable that he changes his script when he disparages his sister Pilate as a "snake": "It ain't what she did; it's what she is" (54). If Macon tends to appraise the members of his community in terms of self-determination—what they do rather than who they are—he makes an exception for his sister, who *is* an animal.

As Macon's distaste aptly illustrates, who or what Pilate is seems far less important than what other characters make of her, how they see her, or how they use her. This point is especially pertinent given that the novel delivers impressions of Pilate chiefly through the words, thoughts, and perceptions of others, most notably from Macon, the midwife Circe, and Milkman himself, rather than through direct narration or description, with the exception of one scene late in the novel. Though readers get a glimpse of Pilate's migratory history, that background is filtered through the listening ears and interpreting mind of Ruth. Even the seemingly neutral description of her at the novel's beginning, which identifies her not by name but by her clothes and voice, her "powerful contralto," "knitted navy cap pulled far down over her forehead," and "old quilt instead of a winter coat" (5-6), is mediated by the perspective of a crowd, the "half a hundred or so people gathered there" who "nudged each other and snickered" at the singing woman (6). Pilate's dress also

attracts the attention of her brother. Macon is ashamed of his sister, who is "odd, murky, and unkempt. . . . He trembled with the thought of the white men in the bank—the men who helped him buy and mortgage houses—discovering this raggedly bootlegger was his sister" (20). Her basement seems "to be rising from rather than settling into the ground," and she chews pine needles, a habit picked up in childhood, so that she "smelled even then like a forest" (27). She and her daughter and granddaughter, Macon comments, "ate what they had or came across or had a craving for" (29). Macon animalizes his sister and her offspring, views them as foragers, as beasts made from the same material as the trees in the forest he and Pilate become lost in as children.

If Pilate appears to loom large in the novel as a mystically naturalistic power, she does so because other characters build her up to mythic proportions. The locals believe that she possesses "the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from fifty yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga—all on account of the fact that she had no navel" (94). These tales contrast sharply with the only scene in which the novel directly narrates Pilate's actions without the filter of another character's perception. Toward the end of *Song of Solomon*, when her granddaughter Hagar returns home from a confrontation with Milkman, Pilate, shorn of her typically majestic reception, appears a frantic, doting grandmother, trying desperately to catch Hagar's eye. When her granddaughter finally responds, Pilate is "thrilled at the sound of Hagar's voice" (308). This scene marks the first and only instance at which the reader gets a sense of Pilate's thoughts and emotions, beyond what she verbally reports to Ruth earlier. Pilate is neither omniscient nor supernatural; she is a weary, anxious parent, wracked by fear and the knowledge that she has no control over her granddaughter's deteriorating health, despite the mythology gathered around her. She in

fact pampers her granddaughter throughout the entire novel. Hagar "liked pretty clothes. . . . They spoiled her, and she, as a favor to their indulgence, hid as best she could the fact that they embarrassed her" (150-1). Despite her mask of cool, aloof power, Pilate tries remarkably hard to win love.

The juxtaposition of these examples illustrates the extent to which Macon and others render Pilate at once more than and less than human by buying into myths about her supernatural gestation and bestial nature. Pilate "borned herself," her midwife Circe tells Milkman (244): "her stomach was as smooth and sturdy as her back, at no place interrupted by a navel. It was the absence of a navel that convinced people that she had not come into this world through normal channels; had never lain, floated, or grown in some warm and liquid place" (28). Rather than contest this claim, Milkman takes it as another detail of his aunt's history as Circe rather fantastically relates it; the notion that Pilate played some arcane role in her own creation is as much a facet of the tall tale of Pilate's gold as the gold itself, yet Milkman rather hurriedly accepts both details as consistent with the narrative, and only asks Circe to provide more information about the gold's location. The inscrutability of Pilate's physical body renders her a larger-than-life, even transcendent figure in the imaginations of the people close to her. She has nothing to show for her time spent in the womb, but the folklore other characters build up around her suggests that her entire life is expansive, an enveloping presence.

Fantasies of maternal merger from both the mother's and child's perspectives feature prominently, as in the stylistically experimental passages in *Beloved* in which Sethe, Denver, and Beloved's voices seem to merge in such a way that mother and daughters become indistinguishable: "I am not separate from her there is no place where I

stop” (259). For Milkman, such intimacy with Ruth carries undertones of both discomfort, for its limitation of his own independence, and shame, for the rumors that circulate about their relationship. A similar sense of abjection underwrites the nonetheless gratifying “wilderness” of characters like Hagar in *Song of Solomon*, Beloved in *Beloved*, and Florens in *A Mercy*. Florens is “nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind,” according to her ex-lover. Her fellow farmworkers perceive that the “docile creature they knew had turned feral” (146). Florens herself seems enamored of the transformation: “You say I am wilderness. I am. Is that a tremble on your mouth, in your eye? Are you afraid? You should be. . . . I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. . . . Free” (157-61). Despite this announcement, her lover’s accusation, as Jennifer Terry points out, “associates [Florens] with a ‘nature’ that is impulsive, dangerous, without boundaries, which presumably requires the order and restraint represented by man” and “activates a familiar patriarchal hierarchy in which woman is corporeal, irrational, excessive, and aligned with the nonhuman world as opposed to masculinized civilization” (139). In light of Terry’s reading, Florens’ reference to her “fullness” appears double-edged. While Florens embraces a sensation of wholeness that makes her feel powerful, she fails to recognize the way the experience compromises her integrity as an individual, much like Milkman in the woods. The concluding lines of *A Mercy* drive home this very catch.

Morrison frequently takes up this difficulty in what Wallace and Armbruster refer to as “portrayals of culturally induced wildness” in which Morrison troubles “the concepts of natural and unnatural, insisting that it is the oppression and hatred that spawn this wildness that are unnatural, rather than the behavior of the person exhibiting it” (217). This sort of wildness finds expression in *Beloved*’s Sethe as well, as a sensibility “whitefolks

planted" (244). Notably, Paul D's observation of the "jungle" within Sethe is predicated not on any kind of innate wildness, but on something cultivated and socially determined. This interpretation is commensurate with Morrison's own appraisal of Guitar, whom she intends to represent a "freedom of the will" that exemplifies choice, but nonetheless comes into conflict with social conventions and racial hierarchies:

> They are the misunderstood people in the world. There's a wildness that they have, a nice wildness. It has bad effects in society such as the one in which we live. It's pre-Christ in the best sense. It's Eve. When I see this wildness gone in a person, it's sad. This special lack of restraint . . . is of particular interest to me. It's in black men despite the reasons society says they're not supposed to have it. . . . when you take away the vocabulary of denigration, what you have is somebody who is fearless and who is comfortable with that fearlessness. It's not about meanness. (Tate 164-5)

Morrison's words conflate three values: nature, the feminine, and the precivilizational.[36] Her favorable reflection on "nice wildness" suggests that the problem between Milkman and Guitar is that the former has lost his wildness, while the latter has been perverted by context. But the passage also implies that wildness or wilderness (Morrison seems to use the two words almost interchangeably) will always be untrustworthy concepts. Wilderness is a cultural construction that collapses the African into savagery through the deployment of naturalized and feminized imagery. Morrison herself uses such imagery to question and critique the notion of an expansive, universalizing wilderness, evidenced in her treatment of Hagar, Florens, and others.

While many critics identify this tendency in Pilate, I believe it is far more accurate to say that other characters project it onto her. Milkman does not consider the possibility that he, like others in the community, has invented Pilate's majesty. He blindly idolizes his

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[36] Wallace and Armbruster go so far as to describe Beloved as "pre-Oedipal in her lack of individual identity," a "status outside of culture" that is "also marked by an association with wild nature" (220-1).

aunt, even as Hagar tries to cool his sycophancy. After witnessing Pilate, who whispers that women "'ain't got the strength you men got'" (94), coolly threaten a man who has mistreated her daughter Reba, Milkman remarks, "'Was that something? Wow! She's two inches taller than he is, and she's talking about weak'" (95). He speaks as a star-struck boy meeting a superhero. He mystifies his aunt from a young age; at his first sight of her, he "knew that . . . nothing—not the wisdom of his father nor the caution of the world—could keep him from her" (36). It is significant that readers' impressions of Pilate's death also arrive from Milkman's perspective. He lays her body down and looks up to see that two "birds circled round them. One dived into the new grave and scooped something shiny in its beak before it flew away. Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (336). This passage calls attention to the extent to which Milkman sentimentalizes Pilate, for the same reasons that Macon distrusts or is disgusted by her. To Macon, Pilate is "ugly, dirty, poor, and drunk" (37). But to Milkman, she is not "dirty; unkempt, yes, but not dirty" (38). Her house was "the only one he knew that achieved comfort without one article of comfort in it. . . . But peace was there, energy, singing, and now his own remembrances" (301). The house is a refuge from which Milkman takes (literally, in the case of Pilate's sack of bones, confused for treasure) but to which he does not give.

Pilate and her house become a location for retreat and gratification and not for reciprocity, as Milkman's disdainful treatment of Hagar demonstrates. He approaches his cousin and former lover at best with derision and at worst as property. While Milkman "stretched his carefree boyhood out for thirty-one years" (98), he "was getting tired of her," as a child grows weary of a faded stuffed animal (91). After he leaves her, she "cradled her

breasts as though they were two mangoes thumbed over in the marketplace and pushed aside" (305). His individualism tends toward the narcissistic in relation to all of the women in his family, whom he understands not as individuals but as extensions of himself: "Never had he thought of his mother as a person, a separate individual, with a life apart from allowing or interfering with his own" (75), and he "had never been able to really distinguish" his sisters "(or their roles) from his mother" (68). In these passages, Morrison's theme of maternal merger takes on a tone not of feminine intimacy, but of chauvinistic instrumentalism.

The difference between these other women and Pilate is that Milkman pastoralizes his aunt. What I mean by "pastoralize" is that Milkman treats Pilate much as he treats the Virginia woodlands, as a precursor to his experience of the latter. Both serve, for Milkman, as devices "of retreat and return" and engage "idealized descriptions of [the] countryside," insofar as Milkman associates Pilate with the earth (Gifford 5, 2). Pilate tellingly remarks to her nephew during his first meeting, "'I ain't the one with the wants. You the one who want something'" (37). Milkman cleaves to Pilate precisely because he believes she has something to give him, some experience or knowledge from which he can return to his quotidian routine assumedly for the better (and often in defiance of his father). Pilate is a curiosity from which Milkman believes he can glean knowledge to make his own life more fulfilling. And both Milkman and his father naturalize Pilate, treat her as an extension of the earth itself. The language Macon uses to characterize his sister, as noted above, is decidedly arboreal. "Pervading everything" in Pilate's house "was the odor of pine and fermenting fruit" (39). To the young Milkman, she is "this lady who had one earring, no navel, and looked like a tall black tree" (39). His perception of his aunt reiterates what Alan

Johnson refers to as “the tired colonialist-nationalist trope of land-as-woman” (507). Morrison is critical of this naturalistic kind of “special soul . . . some magic blacker than everybody else’s and more mysterious.” “Soul,” she writes, “is what the master allows you when you don’t have anything else” (“Behind” 35). Such illusive fire would nonetheless seem to characterize Pilate for both *Song of Solomon*’s dramatis personae and her commentators.

All the same, Morrison insists on the need for “elders,” the “sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (“Rootedness” 62). The question for Morrison seems to be how to imagine such a nearly transcendental figure without lapsing into romanticism, mysticism, or Mammie-ism. The answer seems to lie in a distinction between essence and history. An elder distills knowledge not in her being but in her experience. A character derives “solace” from the figure’s story and “not from the contemplation of serene nature as in a lot of mainstream white literature” (62). If Milkman appears to have learned little from his time at Pilate’s house, he does so because he identifies Pilate with such “serene nature.” Perhaps predictably, in light of this interpretation, he chooses to exploit her, mining her for gold. Nonetheless, Morrison views Pilate as such an elder because of her background of “close, nurturing relationships with two males—her father and her brother. And that intimacy and support was in her and made her fierce and loving because she had that experience” (63). This experience is one whose resonance Milkman, for the duration of the novel, chooses to ignore.

As Stacy Alaimo writes, women in *Song of Solomon* “play Earth Mother to the questing male protagonist” (*Undomesticated Ground* 133-4). Pilate’s home comes to

represent a "prelapsarian nature." These sorts of observations are common to criticism of the novel and bear some revision. Pilate only "plays Earth Mother" to Milkman in his own perception of her. Alaimo does wonder if such a role "idealize[s] the same 'natural woman' that feminist theory has rejected," but I do not believe Morrison herself takes this trope for granted. She far more convincingly passes judgment on Milkman for his indulgence in that fantasy. Morrison typically introduces this idea in order to critique it, as she does through the self-reflexive inner monologue of Lina in *A Mercy*, who finds solace in imagining herself "one more thing that moved in the natural world. She cawed with birds, chatted with plants, spoke to squirrels, sang to the cow and opened her mouth to rain" (48-9). As Terry notes, "Such an alignment with the nonhuman world not only echoes the oppositional definitions of savagery and civility shaped by early European Americans, but also potentially reflects the modern turn to a representative other for access to 'authentic' relations" (134). These "authentic relations" are precisely the universal rhythms Milkman apprehends in Pilate and feels outside Shalimar, in contradistinction to Guitar's selective racial essentialism. But because Milkman also subscribes to an essentialist ideal—putatively universal rather than racially particular—Milkman is as mistaken as Guitar. There is nothing natural about a wilderness that Milkman always constructs himself.

An Admission of Fabrication

Song of Solomon explicitly employs the word "wilderness" to signify two apparently dissimilar but ultimately related meanings. The first is the ordered system described by Ruth, the "logic of lions, trees, toads, and birds" mentioned above (138). This definition comes closest to naming the primordial system Milkman detects in the shared communication of the forest. The second meaning, however, attaches to a "wilderness"

Ruth observes within Hagar, "the focused meanness of a flood or an avalanche of snow which only observers, flying in a rescue helicopter, believed to be an indifferent natural phenomenon, but which the victims, in their last gulp of breath, knew was both directed and personal" (128). That Morrison uses the same character to employ the same word in both instances signals the novel's double-sided understanding of the wilderness concept. Wilderness is neither merely an ordered ecosystem nor the indifference of "natural phenomena," but also "the absence of control. Here one lived knowing that at any time, anybody might do anything" (138). Milkman takes wilderness to emblematize an ecological basis to identity that undermines both the transgressions of whites against blacks and the limitations of an essential conception of racial authenticity. But due to the primordial connectivity with which he characterizes it, that state of nature is indifferent to the individuals within it.

The crucial detail of Milkman's apprehension of a universal, racially blind, and essential identity in the wilderness is his loss of a coherent sense of selfhood. As he follows the hunters, "he found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there—on the earth and on the place where he walked. And he did not limp" (281). Notably, as Milkman feels his sense of selfhood drift away he also feels his disability ease. As mentioned above, Milkman believes his limp to be a defect he must cover up with a masculine posture; in the forest, such performances are no longer necessary, and would obscure what seems to Milkman, at the moment, a more natural mode of being that encapsulates not just himself but also tree, ground, and dog—the entirety of the forest. On the other hand, the disappearance of a

synecdochal limp, a distinctively individualized aspect of his body, signifies the disappearance of the person. As Milkman attends to the universal tenor of each individual voice in the forest, the less distinction he perceives between hunter and dog, Milkman and tree.

Milkman's experience of dissolution mingles the community of entities in the Shalimar forest, living or nonliving, into an indistinguishable, interlocking holism. On the one hand, he appears to derive pleasure from his dissolution. His ecological experience counters Guitar's factional politics of identity, which actively mean him harm. But that same experience undercuts distinctions among species and individuals while also robbing him of the sense of coherent selfhood he has sought. It is worth pointing out that Milkman finds himself unable to act in this situation until the very moment he resumes thinking of himself as an "I," when he throws Guitar off of him beneath the sweet-gum. But even though the sweet-gum tree appears to warn him against his impending murder, at other points in the novel ecology also and equally signifies death. When Milkman travels to Danville, Pennsylvania, in search of the cave where Pilate allegedly left her gold, he stops first at a manor house in which Macon and Pilate sheltered as children. The house appears abandoned, overtaken by the woods. He is at first "oblivious to the universe of wood life that did live there in layers of ivy grown so thick he could have sunk his arm in it up to the elbow. Life that crawled, life that slunk and crept and never closed its eyes. Birth, life, and death—each took place on the hidden side of a leaf." (219). While the expansive and universal sensation Milkman experiences in the Shalimar woodlands provides what he considers a welcome reprieve from the demands made on him by various characters, the wilderness also cares nothing about Milkman.

The scene troubles conventional critical wisdom about racial identity. Wes Berry asks whether *Song of Solomon* risks something "by placing an African American protagonist in a situation where he 'finds' himself after losing his material well-being" (163). Berry challenges the integrity of dissolution narratives with the example of Milkman's slave grandfather: "These African American subjects are deprived of agency unwillingly, in contrast to the tradition of ego dissolution in American nature writing, where subjects *desire* relinquishment of selfhood" (161). Berry's questions probe the novel's defiance of both identitarian and romantically universalist interpretations. Morrison plots conflicts around and between both of these positions. Ruth's observation of wilderness in Hagar, quoted above, highlights the importance the novel places on individual perception in an experience such as Milkman's. The victim of environmental disaster *believes* natural forces to be indifferent but *knows* them to be "directed and personal." This line reverses conventional ecological wisdom, by which events seem matters of providence but operate organically and blindly, and foregrounds the extent to which Morrison presents ideas, places, and even people (especially Pilate) as subject to her characters' interpretations.

But Milkman certainly does not "find" himself in the forest. It is tempting to say that he comes out of this experience having learned something about himself or his community, as many critics have done. But Milkman really seems to have learned rather little from the episode. The novel issues its own declaration of community premised on shared interests through personification of the "farm," granting it a voice that speaks to its black inhabitants "like a sermon":

> "Never mind you can't tell one letter from another, never mind you born a slave, never mind you lose your name . . . Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts

> his mind to it and his back in it. . . . We got a home in this rock, don't you see! . . . Grab this land! Take it, hold it, my brothers, make it, my brothers, shake it, squeeze it, turn it, twist it, beat it, kick it, kiss it, whip it, stomp it, dig it, plow it, seed it, reap it, rent it, buy it, sell it, own it, build it, multiply it, and pass it on—can you hear me? Pass it on!" (235)

This passage does not appear to express an understanding of community that Milkman shares even after his visit. The novel's use of the farm's disembodied voice ties these workers into fraternity with the earth—*not* identification—an environmental vision that differs drastically from the universalizing holism Milkman experiences in the forest, which at this point would appear to merely reiterate the narcissism with which he approaches the women in his family. In fact, the chief value Milkman takes from his journey seems to lie, at first, in his discovery of his ancestors' local fame, their embeddedness in myth and folklore. He spends his last days in Shalimar and trip back to Michigan romanticizing a man who abandoned his wife and children: "He could hardly wait to get home. To tell his father, Pilate . . . 'You think Macon Dead was something? Huh. Let me tell you about *his* daddy. You ain't heard nothing yet" (329). Milkman's distant ancestor Solomon, like Milkman himself, leaves a distraught woman behind in the wake of his flight, a point that Milkman overlooks in celebration of his great-grandfather's magnificent departure.

It is not until Pilate forcefully announces her presence as an individual separate from Milkman, smacking him across the head in the final pages of the novel, that he begins to reconsider Solomon's tale. Hagar has died in his absence: "He had hurt her, left her, and now she was dead—he was certain of it. He had left her. While he dreamt of flying, Hagar was dying" (332). This realization demystifies Solomon in Milkman's imagination, and he confronts the fact that his ancestor "left [his wife] Ryna behind and twenty children. . . . And Ryna had thrown herself all over the ground, lost her mind, and was still crying in a

ditch. Who looked after those twenty children? Jesus Christ, he left twenty-one children!" (332). He faces this conclusion not in the revelatory light of some purifying wilderness, but in Pilate's dirty basement, back in the city.

It is notable that, despite Milkman's lengthy investigation from Michigan to Danville to Shalimar and back again to each, he never discovers any firm answers to any of his questions, about himself or about his people. He digs through his family history, discovers some names, and learns about some relationships, but the motivations underlying each event and action remain vexingly opaque. He receives only myths and multiple versions of the same stories, with many inconsistencies. One of his most pressing questions wonders why his grandmother Sing "want[ed] her husband to keep that awful name," Macon Dead, inscribed by a drunk white man in a clerical error. "To wipe out the past?" he asks. "What past? Slavery?" (293). Macon tells Milkman that "'Mama liked . . . the name. Said it was new and would wipe out the past" (54). Milkman later tells Guitar that a "'Cracker gave it to him. . . . And he took it. Like a fuckin sheep. Somebody should have shot him'" (89). Milkman's vitriol suggests that maintaining an original name would have been a more honorable retention of accurate history, or truer personhood: "Under the recorded names were other names, just as 'Macon Dead,' recorded for all time in some dusty file, hid from view the real names of people, places, and things. Names that had meaning" (329). Real names ostensibly signify something true and natural about a person—their heritage and origin, who they are. Milkman never finds any answers in his search for authentic history. We must assume that there are none, or that such answers are undiscoverable. Milkman and Pilate both must content themselves with fragments of stories that may well be false.

Morrison herself “never knew the real names of my father’s friends” (LeClair). While she considers the decimation of ancestral and tribal names “a huge psychological scar,” she ascertains a hopeful sense of determination in the alternative: “The best thing you can do is take another name which is yours because it reflects something about you or your own choice.” Milkman’s own name, like almost every other name in the novel, is a fabrication, granted not for being born but for a certain act or event (in Milkman’s case, an embarrassingly long breastfeeding period). His name is not an expression of who he is but a function of what he does or did, a point in which he ultimately takes pride by the end of the novel: “He closed his eyes and thought of the black men in Shalimar, Roanoke, Petersburg, Newport News, Danville, in the Blood Bank, on Darling Street, in the pool halls, the barbershops. Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes weaknesses. Names that bore witness” (330). These names are not linked to any essential definition of the individual, but provide testimony to history, events, and choices.[37] On the one hand, this tradition is remarkably individualistic, rooted in agency and self-direction. But on the other, these names are collective articulations, granted not given, and as such manifestations of relationships and shared culture. As Guitar tells Milkman early in the novel, “‘Niggers get their names the way they get everything else—the best way they can. The best way they can’” (88). That this statement comes from Guitar, who believes quite zealously in the inviolability and homogenous authenticity of the black race, is ironic, but its aphoristic prominence draws attention to the crucial role the sentiment plays in the novel.

[37] A similar understanding of names persists throughout *Beloved*, in which Baby Suggs’ former master Mr. Garner wonders at the origins of her name. “‘Jenny Whitlow is what [Suggs’] bill said,’” Garner notes, asking if her former owner had called her by what he considers, legally, to be her true name. Baby Suggs, however, “was all she had left of the ‘husband’ she claimed” (175).

The significance of names indicates the novel's stance on Milkman's sojourn in the universalizing wilderness. Not only is that experience temporary, but it also robs Milkman of the important identifiers his community has built up around him, which give him a sense of self-identity to begin with. His dissolution denies any mark of selfhood. But these names also defy the rigid conception of racial authenticity Guitar demands. In other words, if *Song of Solomon* does not particularly endorse either the identitarianism that forms the basis of Guitar's racial politics or a universal ideal, the one conclusion it does come to is that there is no authentic basis to these people's lives, and that such a situation is not a bad thing. The novel above all argues for the necessary and positive failure of any unifying sense of the self. Even if a figure like Milkman can apprehend, in the wilderness, a sense of connection that transcends both individual and race, this realization does not particularly provide any answers to his questions or fulfillment as an individual. Chasing a purportedly natural condition for its universality might be downright destructive, given the people like Hagar left by the wayside as Milkman ditches his commitments and responsibilities.

What Milkman's experience does provide, however, is an admission of fabrication—an understanding that Milkman's and others' identities are, at least on some level, constructed. This point provides Milkman with a counter to Guitar's flattened ideology, and dramatizes words spoken by Pilate early in the narrative, when Milkman is a child: "'You think dark is just one color, but it ain't. There're five or six kinds of black. Some silky, some woolly. Some just empty. Some like fingers. And it don't stay still. It moves and changes from one kind of black to another" (40-1). Pilate's words immediately refer to the time she spent wandering the Pennsylvania woodlands with Macon as children, but they also gesture toward a pervasive theme throughout the novel. Blackness, like any

identity, is a construction collectively articulated by individuals; and that identity not only changes but is ultimately only what these characters make of it. Pilate's observations apply to the ideas of nature and wilderness just as compellingly as to people.

CHAPTER 4

The Essential Ecosystem: *Surfacing*'s Identity Crises

You aren't and can't be apart from nature. We're all part of the biological universe: men as well as women.

Margaret Atwood, "An Interview with Margaret Atwood"

Thrust aside, completely removed from culture, this nature—the repository of essentialism and stasis—nonetheless remains dangerously intact.

Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*

In her 1978 manifesto *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, Mary Daly advocates for the coming social domination of women and their particular, innate gifts. She describes the titular term, "Gyn/Ecology," as "the process of . . . dis-covering, de-veloping the complex web of living/loving relationships *of our own kind*. It is about women living, loving, creating our Selves, our cosmos. . . . hearing the call of the wild, naming our wisdom . . . Gyn/Ecology affirms that everything is connected" (10-1). She writes that within "this anti-pollutant, purifying . . . aura of gynocentric consciousness, life-loving feminists have the power to affirm the basic Gyn/Ecological principle that everything is connected with everything else" (11). She cites Adrienne Rich, who writes that "in the very act of *becoming more conscious* of her situation in the world, a woman may feel herself coming deeper than ever into touch with her unconscious and with her body" (95). On the one hand, Daly claims that women are essentially more "ecological" than men. On the other, and like Rich, she takes the perspective of standpoint theory, suggesting that women, because of their oppression, are better equipped for "seeing the totality of the Lie which is patriarchy" and undertaking the "constant effort to see the interconnectedness of things" (19-20). This second interpretation of women's position in relation to both the dominant modes of social organization and the ecosystem—a "dynamic integrity" that "enables [women] to begin

seeing through the mad reversals which have been our mindbindings" (21)—resembles the environmental justice accounts mentioned in Chapter 3, which understand racially-motivated environmental consciousness to be inspired by shared oppression. These texts—even Daly's, to an extent—share an impulse toward the ecological universal via the perceptions of the identitarian particular.

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) is also concerned with a universal conception of ecological interconnectivity. The novel has typically been read in Daly's terms, as a representation of the discovery of essential womanhood, as "a quest romance, in which the woman hero undergoes a physical and spiritual ordeal in order to gain insight into herself and her world" (Fiamengo 53).The unnamed narrator, the script reads, endures an odyssey of identity, during which encounters with capitalism, commerce, and American influence provide moments of contrast with the narrator's "search for authenticity and truth" (Wisker 19-20). *Surfacing*, Fiona Tolan writes, "is, clearly, a text of its time; influenced by," or more accurately responding to, "rising second-wave feminism and sympathetic to the concerns of ecofeminism and environmentalism" (94). Most critics acknowledge the novel's intersection with a period of increasing feminist mobilization and anti-commercial efforts to get in touch with nature, and many have argued that the narrator emerges in the final pages transformed by her "descent into primeval, preconscious awareness as a reborn woman who has discovered identity, meaning, and purpose" (Lecker 186). As Eleonora Rao writes, *Surfacing* "has largely been read as a narrative of quest, a journey of self-discovery" (21).

I argue in this chapter the opposite. The novel is far more convincingly read as a narrative of self-undiscovery, particularly in its latter half. The narrator undergoes radical

experiments of ego-dissolution after returning home to Canadian lake country in search of her missing father and following her reconstructed memory of an abortion years prior. She emphatically dismisses her sense of self, and increasingly oscillates between cohesive self-identity and identification with the entirety of the ecosystem: “I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning. . . . I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place” (187). This narrative complicates the premium placed on authenticity by the New Left that outlasted student radicalism and persisted into and beyond the era of identity politics.

One must account for “Atwood’s repeated refusal of the [feminist] label for her work” (Parkin-Gounelas 935). The novel, I argue, in fact critiques the premise of essential womanhood, as well as the notion of authentic identity more broadly. Atwood is interested in essence only insofar as she believes the very idea pulverizes claims to specificity that appeals to essence have often been used to support. I do not mean to suggest that the narrator’s experience as a woman is incidental to the plot; her complicated relationship with the very idea of “woman,” which she takes to be chiefly defined and authenticated by men, inspires her dissolutions. Her relationships with several men almost entirely revolve around their perception of and gratification from sex as the defining aspect of the narrator’s identity as a “liberated” woman. Her friend Anna’s husband David appeals to her as a “‘groovy chick’” for whom sex “‘keeps you healthy’” (152). And the narrator undergoes her abortion not of her own choice, but under mandate by her (married) lover, who “talked about it as though it was legal, simple, like getting a wart removed” (145). What the narrator’s experiences have in common is her suitors’ casual approach to sex and her body, and more importantly the assumption that willing sex defines her identity as a “groovy

chick" for whom an abortion must be as banal as a trip to the grocer. In a political context in which "men define reality and women are defined in terms of men" (Jaffe and Dohrn 356), the narrator attempts not to be a woman at all. Her dismissal of selfhood, she comes to believe, removes her from her suitors' pleasure.

These details are congruent with a body of feminist criticism targeting a male-dominated medical establishment, which troubled the widespread "view that reproductive technologies have given women control over their motherhood—and thereby over their own lives" (Stanworth 14). The traumatic aspect of the narrator's abortion is not the death of her unborn child or her hand in a procedure that "threatens the extinction of female personality (Wilt 67), as some have argued, but the institutional coercion by which she undergoes the procedure. The abortion, Atwood explains, "is coerced—it was forced. That's not an 'antiabortion' stand. It's an anticoercion stand" (Brans & Atwood 302). In this respect, the abortion sanctions of Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and the mandated abortion of *Surfacing* carry the same significance, in the grand scheme of Atwood's corpus. Her work, as a whole, critiques various ideals of womanhood not specifically for their presumed fecundity or sexual liberation, but generally for men's expectation of adherence to those prescribed ideals.

Atwood's critique extends beyond patriarchy to prod certain feminisms as well. *Handmaid*, at the very least, satirizes and criticizes the notion that women must "get pregnant and have babies in order to 'fulfill their femininity.'" But Atwood is also dissatisfied with "women being told they oughtn't to get pregnant," a dictum she perceives as originating among only a few feminist camps (Brans and Atwood 303). She even more fervently rejects the idea of a monolithic and essential "womanhood," and "den[ies]" the

notion that "'women' are a fixed quantity. . . . There is no single, simple, static 'women's point of view'" (Atwood and Morris). She is by no means hostile to organized feminist movements, but she is decidedly wary of embracing a doctrine. She heartily dismisses the idea, advanced by one interviewer, that her work does or even can "espouse a feminist position or propaganda" (Brans and Atwood 301), and wryly incorporates her ambivalence regarding feminist criticism in her fiction (Elaine, the protagonist of *Cat's Eye* [1988], laments the ease with which feminists uncritically take up her work).

Given Atwood's outspoken suspicion of arguments for essential womanhood, as well as the notion that fiction should perform the work of the manifesto, it is remarkable that so many critics have reviewed *Surfacing*, as Atwood herself notes, "almost exclusively as a feminist or ecological treatise," and as a series of "equations," of "'man is to woman as culture is to nature . . . as the United States is to Canada as dominator is to dominated'" ("Reply" 340).[38] Shortly after *Surfacing*'s publication, a 1976 "Women and Religion" special issue of *Signs*, dedicated to the question of what values a "feminist theology" might entail, featured several articles about the novel, all of which address whether such a theology should "retain a traditional and symbolic association between women and nature" (Stimpson vi). The articles "warily" agree that feminism writ large should—and does—embrace a spiritual vision of women's special, innate, and "organic" gifts, and, more certainly, that *Surfacing* explores and vindicates this theme. Atwood responds to these essays with a mixture of pleasant flattery and cordial disagreement. "My own view," she

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[38] One notable exception to this trend is Stacy Alaimo's reading of *Surfacing* in *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (2000). Alaimo and I agree that the novel foregrounds the failure of a woman's flight into the wilderness. We disagree, however, on the significance of both the failure and the flight. Alaimo believes the novel ultimately takes a heterosexist stance regarding reproduction, and that it "becomes determined by the very matrix of forces it denounces, thus preventing a satisfactory conclusion for either 'woman' or 'nature'" (142). As I indicate below, I believe the novel in fact expands what reproduction signifies.

writes, "is that my novel is not a treatise at all, but a novel" ("Reply" 340). Her narrator "need not correspond to either the real or the desirable," but she might still "have something we can learn."

One thing I will suggest we learn is that a logic roping women to nature is not that desirable or even intelligible at all. The mystical-matriarchal interpretation common to *Surfacing* criticism aligns the novel with early ecofeminist tracts like *Gyn/Ecology* and *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (1978), in which Susan Griffin responds to the charge that "woman is both inferior . . . and closer to nature" (xv). Griffin's solution appears to be to embrace that nature, to turn it against the rationalization of men, who are "terrifying in their white hairlessness" (187): "*we are leaves of ivy and sprigs of wallflower. We are women. We rise from the wave. . . . We are women and nature*" (1). Carolyn Merchant refers to this gendered alignment of women with nature as "an age-old association—an affiliation that has persisted throughout culture, language, and history" (xv). As Val Plumwood writes, to be aligned with nature in such a context is also "to be defined as passive, as non-agent or non-subject, as the 'environment' or invisible background conditions against which the 'foreground' achievements of reason or culture (provided typically by the white, male expert or entrepreneur) take place" (4).[39]

Karla Armbruster writes that the bulk of ecofeminist theory vulnerable to this criticism has grown chiefly out of the re-essentializing traditions of cultural feminisms that focus on physical connections to the earth through menstrual cycles and childbirth (99), a series of feminist enclaves that "grew up around the idea of matriarchy" as "increasingly,

[39] Dorothy Dinnerstein writes that "[i]n our failure to distinguish clearly between her and nature, we assign to each the properties that belong to the other. Our over-personification of nature . . . is inseparable from our under-personification of woman" (413).

women were beginning to investigate the identification of woman with nature" (Griffin, *Made* 14-5).[40] While Griffin cautiously embraces this trend (she finds its "emotional accuracy" appealing), she notes that within this feminist branch "it was being suggested, as it had also been during the nineteenth century, that men, valuing power, produce nations, conflict and wars, and that women, valuing life, produce relationship, continuity and peace"—an alignment the author herself rejects as "far too simple a description of men and women in contemporary society" (*Made* 15).

Surfacing likewise resists the commentary that has accumulated around it that celebrates the novel for its engagement with "a more general move among some feminists toward reasserting the very old idea that there is a magical power in the female body, in female procreativity and nurturance" (Snitow 714). To argue that the narrator discovers a stronger sense of gendered identity is to ignore the novel's conclusion. As Robert Lecker notes, the only thing with which the narrator emerges from her descent is a sense that to remain submerged would only define her in terms of the "back-to-nature cliché" already applied to women by the very culture she seeks to escape, while to actually emerge as a "new woman" would be to re-enter the patriarchal system she flees. The novel ends, instead, with a clearer image of the narrator's double-bind. Atwood is also keenly aware of the overlap between traditional and feminist motivations in appeals to natural womanhood. She ends *Handmaid* with a fascinating epilogue, a transcript of academic conference proceedings that take place over a century after the events of Offred's account. The lecturer speaks to the patriarchal Gilead regime's decision to educate Handmaids by other women,

[40] "The story of a land where women live at peace with themselves and with the natural world is a recurrent theme of feminist utopias," Plumwood writes (7). This ideal, however, "replaces the 'angel in the house' version of women by the 'angel in the ecosystem' version" (9).

as well as its calculated indulgence in "particicution," in which handmaids recreationally tear apart scapegoated men in controlled doses: "There are echoes here of the fertility rites of early Earth-goddess cults. . . . Gilead was, although undoubtedly patriarchal in form, occasionally matriarchal in content" (390).

Handmaid's most obvious critique targets the identification of women with their biology. Handmaids are "two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chaises" (176). They are "containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important" (124); their uniforms are "the color of blood, which defines us" (11). As Michelle Stanworth points out, radical feminist theory protesting reproductive technology as "the vehicle that will . . . destroy the claim to reproduction that is the foundation of women's identity" (16) unwittingly defends the institutionalized valorization of motherhood taken to an extreme in *Handmaid*, which many feminists sought and seek to deconstruct. Shulamith Firestone responds to this equation between woman and reproductive capacity in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970). Following Simone de Beauvoir, she contends that "[u]nlike economic class, sex class sprang directly from a biological reality . . . this difference of itself did not necessitate the development of a class system—the domination of one group by another—the reproductive *functions* of these differences did" (355). Atwood might further specify this comment. Certain *interpretations* of these functions have subordinated women.

Beginning in the 1970s, feminist psychoanalysis also sought to address the "uncomplicated opposition between women's perceived unity with nature and male-associated culture's alienation from it" (Armbruster 98). Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982) challenges the narrative that what she calls the "dissociation" in women's

"voice" signals women's developmental deficiency. She argues instead for the importance of difference in women's development, which she characterizes by "a struggle for connection" rather than "a problem in achieving separation" (xv). Women offer "a relational voice: a voice that insists on staying in connection . . . so that psychological separations which have so long been justified in the name of autonomy, selfhood, and freedom no longer appear the *sine qua non* of human development but as a human problem" (xiii). At the same time, she rejects the notion that intimacy and interrelationship are "intuitive" or "instinctive" qualities (17). If women can be said to be more ecologically attuned, this predilection would be the result of socialization, not biology, in that contemporary culture does not limit in women, as it does in men, a natural human capacity for interconnection.

Nancy Chodorow also dismisses the instinctual argument, and levels her critique toward the "alternate sexual politics and analysis of sexual inequality" that has "tended toward an essentialist position" (420). Chodorow contends that "ideologies of difference . . . are produced, socially, psychologically, and culturally, by people" (434) by scrutinizing the psychoanalytic notion of separation-individuation, the idea of "the first 'me'-'not-me' division, in the development of the 'I,' or self" (422), and "the development of ego boundaries" (423). She argues that social forces lead boys to fixate "on a more fixed 'me'-'not-me' distinction. . . . By contrast, the female's self is less separate" (431). Women's "core gender identity" is "built upon, and does not contradict, her primary sense of oneness and identification with her mother . . . a relational connection to the world" (431).[41]

[41] Dinnerstein argues by contrast that "the period before the infant has any clear idea where the self ends and the outside world begins" provides the "earliest roots of antagonism to women" (401) because she is perceived as "the center also of the non-self, an unbounded, still unarticulated region . . . She is this global, inchoate, all-embracing presence before she is a person" (401-2). As a result, "When she does become a

Gilligan and Chodorow both "suggest that, developmentally, the maternal identification represents and is experienced as generically human for children of both genders" (Chodorow 432). The phrase "generically human" is significant. These writers contend that the sense of connection, expansiveness, and even holism that both patriarchal nature/culture dualism and early ecofeminism have identified with women is an essentially human trait that becomes repressed, specifically in men. This interpretation does uphold the notion that women are closer to nature than men, but revises this position in such a way that men have merely forgotten the natural order of things. Chodorow notes that this attention to human psychic prehistory—so influential to postwar psychological and political discourse—redefines selfhood so that it "does *not* depend only on the strength and impermeability of ego boundaries. Nor are these problems bound up with questions of gender; rather, they are bound up with questions of self" (432). The veracity of such accounts aside, the notion of universal yet repressed connectivity manifests in both *Surfacing* and *Woman and Nature*.

Despite the fact that Griffin proclaims that "[t]his earth is my sister" (*Woman* 219), her dual contentions that "*we have made up boundaries*" and that "*this earth is made from our bodies*" (225-6) suggest a more universal conception of ecological integration that has been asymmetrically portioned. Griffin writes that "as the depth and dimension of the oppression of women became more real to me, I became more real to myself," and that feminism "had allowed me to reach a deeper self, a self untouched by convention, a self

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person, her person-ness is shot through for the child with these earlier qualities" so that "when it becomes clear that this person is a female in a world of males and females, femaleness comes to be the name for, the embodiment of, these global and inchoate and all-embracing qualities," and can be defined as "quasi persons, quasi humans" (402). Despite her differences with Chodorow, Dinnerstein here lends support to feminist counterargument challenging uncritical identifications of women with nature.

not molded to society's idea of who a woman should be. This was an earlier, pre-social being who had come to life in me" (*Made* 7-8). Her conviction that a "self more whole than I had allowed to live before was being born in me" (7) seems at once specific to her idea of women and yet expansively human. It is "pre-social" and "untouched," prior to ideas of "who a woman should be." This more authentic self seems to defy gender entirely. Though Griffin appears to claim essential sorority with the earth, she more forcefully claims an essentially human relation, which patriarchal culture has repressed. And she conceptualizes this relation using dissolutive rhetoric: "*we know ourselves to be made of this earth, because we know sunlight moves through us, water moves through us, everything moves, everything changes, and the daughters are returned to their mothers. . . . The body of the animal buried in the ground feeds the seed*" (224). She attempts to reach an awareness of ecology by mapping her sense of self-identity onto the ecosystem as a whole.

Following similar logic, the narrator of *Surfacing* initially rejects a gendered identity position by attempting to identify with the ecosystem itself. Her dissolution reads as an endeavor to pinpoint something essentially human at a base, ecological level. The suspected pregnancy she feels during her dissolutions at first appears to place her in the discourse of women's essential sorority with nature, but her repeated use of the term "human" consistently undermines this association. She challenges the traditional alignment of female/feminine with nature and male/masculine with culture in that she does not view her ecological embeddedness as being especially feminine. To be authentically ecological, Atwood suggests, is not to be woman, but to be indistinct, to abandon self-identity in favor of the identity of the collective. On the one hand, this vision of authenticity as ecological dispersal dismisses typical notions of what the New Left, counterculture, and new social

movements expected of identity. On the other, it comes strikingly close to an identity politics of ecology, which, while expansive, defines essential identity in terms of brute matter.

The reduction of the human to its biology is one of Atwood's enduring literary preoccupations. This theme typically represents an oppressive de-individualization of human subjects. In *Handmaid* this process is codified and mandated by the state. *Oryx and Crake* (2003) introduces the Crakers, docile and easily manipulable sub-humans biogenetically altered by the titular Crake to breed only during specific periods of heat. These works examine human reductionism in terms of its imposition by either the state or corporation. The figures at the helm of each text's focal organization, the Gilead hierarchy and Crake, de-emphasize the particular identity or identities of the individuals and populations they police and modify, granting primacy not to the subject but to their biology, specifically the genitalia. If these later texts feature individuals or governments who appeal to the natural to justify the reduction of certain people to their biological functions, *Surfacing* reverses the model, following a woman who would pursue this end of her own accord. The narrator flees toward a de-individualized, biological sense of expansive identity to escape the patriarchal system that Atwood's later works recast as the very force driving such an identification.

The de-individualizing tendency to reduce the human to the biological recurs throughout Atwood's corpus chiefly as a matter of critique. It would be a mistake to assume that Atwood's attitude regarding this theme is more laudatory in *Surfacing* merely because biological reductionism is pursued rather than imposed. The fact that *Surfacing*'s narrator actively frames matter as a basis for identity does not itself reflect the author's position

regarding the idea. In light of this theme's trajectory across Atwood's career, *Surfacing* reads almost as a gently cautionary tale. The novel dramatizes an individual's experience when she takes seriously appeals to the natural as a basis for identity and concludes with that character's admission of such a project's impossibility. Were she to follow through, she would simply die, literally giving herself over to the totality of the ecosystem. But even if the narrator cannot successfully sustain a dissolution of bounded selfhood, she does, for her own part, undermine any stable definition of "woman." In *Surfacing*, reproduction, limited to a woman's body, gives way to an emphasis on replication, on ecosystemic cycles of life, death, consumption, and defecation—a tendency that reflects a radical feminist desire to sever sexuality from reproductive capability.

In other words, the narrator indulges the notion that to embrace the "natural" is to discover a more essential identity, but when she does so she experiences identity in terms more resonant with the psychic originary state described by Chodorow than the essential womanhood celebrated by Daly. She discovers in the ecosystem not essential womanhood, but what we might call essential humanhood, the organic materiality of the human body as it participates in that ecosystem. The sense of identity she finds in ecology is expansive by virtue of the environment's intricacy, in light of which "woman" comes to mean very little. In this regard, Atwood's early ecofeminist commentators are correct, but only to a point. The narrator yearns for authentic self-definition, but she cannot reasonably achieve it. If *Surfacing* does not explicitly critique early ecofeminism, it does deconstruct its premises through the narrative example of an individual who takes such an appeal to natural or essential identity literally. In tracing the narrator's failure to build any sustainable sense of identity on a purely natural or ecological basis, the novel takes an anti-essentialist stance,

a position visible in other texts of Atwood's oeuvre. An appeal to nature or essence, Atwood suggests, has little to do with identity positions, precisely because such an appeal speaks to what is universal about individuals—the organism's flesh and blood.

Atwood's fascination with the Canadian wilderness, with "being lost in the frozen North—and going crazy there" (*Strange Things* 3), evident in both her fiction and criticism, clearly looms large in *Surfacing*. The novel is Atwood's own attempt to answer a question she poses over twenty years later in *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995): "What accounts for [the] urge to claim kinship, and to see wilderness as salvation?" (4). I would add my own question to Atwood's. What does claiming such kinship entail? Atwood herself, by virtue of her extensive ecological activism, clearly recognizes that humans are necessarily, physically part of the natural world. Her question moves beyond this obvious point to ask what accounts for an urge to identify with the wilderness, and what such identification might look like, if it is even possible. The next section will address the second point, and consider what Atwood suggests this identification entails. I will then consider the narrator's motivations, and the constraints she believes make necessary a dismissal of gendered identity altogether. I conclude with an examination of *Surfacing*'s ultimate pessimism regarding appeals to natural or authentic identity as part of a sustainable project of selfhood.

"The First True Human"

Late in *Surfacing*, the narrator seduces her boyfriend Joe in the woods, after over 150 pages spent refusing his advances. Their intercourse is a matter of heat, of animal urges: "pleasure is redundant, the animals don't have pleasure. I guide him into me, it's the right season, I hurry. He trembles and then I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me,

rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long" (165). This scene of impregnation is often taken by critics quite literally. Yet in the final pages the narrator comments that the fetus within her is "perhaps not real" (197). The "time-traveler, the primeval one who will have to learn, shape of a goldfish now in my belly, undergoing its watery changes," is not a child at all but an idea or sensibility on the part of the narrator herself, growing within her: "It might be the first one, the first true human" (198).

In pronouncing this improbable fetus the first "true" human, the narrator makes a claim regarding the very definition of "human," discounting the human-ness of all the individuals with whom she has to this point interacted. She rebuffs Joe's sexual advances because "the cloth separated from him and I saw he was human, I didn't want him in me, sacrilege, he was one of the killers" (148). This encounter marks the first of many moments at which the narrator uses the word "human" disparagingly. When David accuses the narrator of "hating" men, she at first agrees with him, before realizing that "it wasn't the men I hated, it was the Americans, the human beings, men and women both. They'd had their chance" (155). Two details about this line merit attention. For one thing, the narrator conflates the words "American" and "human." The "American," one interviewer has observed, signifies "something coming up over the border which isn't necessarily a good thing," an aversion Atwood in that interview claims to be "a very widespread feeling in the country itself" (Atwood and Gibson 108). Americans are "the kind who catch more than they can eat and they'd do it with dynamite if they could get away with it" (*Surfacing* 63); they "liked everything collapsible" (64)—a phrase immediately referring to camping equipment but also suggestive of ecosystems. The narrator describes the influx of American business and tourism in northern Quebec as a "disease . . . spreading up from the

south" (3). And the bug is catching. By the end of the novel, the narrator believes David, Anna, and even the remote villagers have become "American, they are all Americans now" (173). Her companions are "turning to metal, skins galvanizing, heads congealing to brass knobs, components and intricate wires ripening inside" (160).

There is a certain anti-modernity at work in these passages, a distrust of industry and of Americans as its chief harbinger. The narrator identifies tourism and industry with the wanton execution of local wildlife, represented grotesquely by a heron left hanging on a portage route among the lakes: "Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn't they just throw it away like the trash? To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill" (118). Americanness, it would seem, has less to do with nationality than it does with power and domination. The narrator learns the heron-executing "Americans" are actually other Canadians on holiday, but she concludes that "[i]t doesn't matter what country they're from . . . they're still Americans, they're what's in store for us, what we are turning into" (130). If America is less a country and more an economic force that infects or dominates Canada—and this is a position that Atwood has avowed for the greater part of her career—then it stands to reason that regardless of country of origin, we are all Americans. This possibility terrifies the narrator not only because of its environmental implications, but also because the heron-killers mistake her, too, for an American vacationer.

The second important detail regarding the passage above is that the narrator ends her condemnation with a striking accusation: "They'd had their chance." Their chance to what? Atwood provides no explicit indication of what the narrator believes these Americans have given up, missed out on, or disavowed. An earlier passage illuminates this cryptic comment. The narrator reflects on how, as children, she and her brother "would

play we were animals; our parents were the humans, the enemies who might shoot us or catch us, we would hide from them" (131). As a child during the Second World War and as an adult returned to lake country, she feels that "[t]he trouble some people have being German . . . I have being human." The narrator's belief that David, Anna, and Joe have "had their chance," and that "[s]econdhand American" infests them "in patches, like mange or lichen" (153-4), translates as an accusation of conversion. Her companions identify not with human nature, but with its perversion. The implication of this position is that to be "American," to exercise domination against the natural world, is to no longer be a *real* human.

The narrator's announcement of the arrival of the "first true human" does not suggest an outright dismissal of the human as such, and troubles the critical commonplace that the narrator dismisses the human because she wants to be an animal. The line bespeaks an impulse to redefine the human *as* animal, or, more accurately, to recover a conception of human as animal. The idea of impregnation, represented by the poignant image of a fetus that is likely not really in the narrator's womb, signifies the threshold not of a child's birth, but of the narrator's rebirth as merely human. She redefines her identity in terms of materiality. She beholds this minimal creature in her own reflection in the final pages: "I turn the mirror around: in it there's a creature neither animal nor human, furless" (196).

The fetus' existence is ultimately immaterial. The important detail about the narrator's possible pregnancy is the way in which it conceptualizes a lack of clear material boundaries between organisms, whether inside or outside the body, which is part and parcel of the narrator's material self-definition. Because she imagines this most essential of identities in terms of a lack of clear boundaries as to where body and environment begin

and end, she identifies with the ecosystem itself and experiences identity as dispersed. Her despair at her parents' deaths gives way to an anguished shout into the forest: "'I'm here!' But nothing happens'" (177). The forest is indifferent to her announcement. In response to the ecosystem's silence, her sense of coherent and bounded identity falls apart:

> I'm ice-clear, transparent, my bones and the child inside me showing through the green webs of my flesh, the ribs are shadows, the muscles jelly, the trees are like this too, they shimmer, their cores glow through the wood and bark. . . . the boulders float, melt, everything is made of water, even the rocks. In one of the languages there are no nouns, only verbs held for a longer moment. . . . I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning. . . . I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place. (187)

The line about language is especially important given that Atwood herself draws attention to a vocabulary consisting of "only verbs" in an interview. The narrator's ordeal is "a visionary experience in which language is transformed" (Hammond & Atwood 28). Atwood explains this phenomenon as an expression of "Indian influence" on the novel, specifically a "language in which there are no nouns, only verbs, and things are not seen as discrete concrete separate objects," but as a "general matrix which manifests itself in certain ways. In the language you wouldn't say a deer is running across a field. You'd say it manifests itself as the quality of deerness engaged in the activity of running" (Hammond & Atwood 28). Atwood's reference to "the quality of deerness" resembles appeals to authenticity of the sort expressed by Edward Abbey in *Desert Solitaire* (1968), a commitment to approaching and respecting a tree or a bird "as it is in itself" (6). Her diction adds the urgency of spontaneity. The deer possesses the quality of deerness not as an object, but as it operates in its environment, as it moves around, eats, shits, reproduces, and dies. The quality of deerness ultimately has nothing special to say about deer as physical creatures (organisms "are not seen as discrete concrete separate objects"), so much as it

describes the particular way a given species takes part in universal ecological processes. According to this argument, the essence of deer is identical to the essence, say, of cat or of human. Deer just do things a little differently.

In *Surfacing*, Atwood gives voice to a narrator who embraces the notion that the most essential thing about her is her role in an interconnected system. She takes the system itself as the basis for her identity *because* it is the most natural thing about her. Her dissolution begins with the abandonment of linguistic communication, "the names of things fading but their forms and uses remaining, the animals learned what to eat without nouns" (151). Language, she believes, is a matter of the "head," the "trouble . . . in the knob at the top of our bodies. I'm not against the body or the head either: only the neck, which creates the illusion that they are separate" (75). This division, separating the narrator's sense of self, in her head, from sensations of her environment felt by her body, obscures her relationship with creatures around her: "Language divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole" (147).

"Wholeness," a vexing term in its own right, takes on expansive significance in *Surfacing*, in which the narrator equates being whole as an individual with the whole of the ecosystem. A solid, unfractured identity comprises not a bounded, individual psyche, but multiple bodies interacting. Over the course of her dissolution, the narrator no longer grasps artificial taxonomies. She observes in her parents' garden "weeds and legitimate plants alike, there is no distinction. . . . The garden is a stunt, a trick. It could not exist without the fence" (186). The concepts of "inside" and "outside" cease to hold meaning. An expansive psychic state, inclusive of her environment, characterizes her whole self.

She accesses this feeling of integrity with the recollection of her abortion. That memory returns with the discovery of her father's body lurking beneath the surface of the lake, weighed down by a heavy camera he used to photograph indigenous paintings on the cliffs overhanging the water. She spies him "below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing" (143). At first, she mistakes the body for her drowned brother, "hair floating around the face, image I'd kept from before I was born" (144). This line refers to a fantasy she relates early in the novel, in which she imagines herself as her mother, gazing into the same water at the end of a dock at her brother's upturned face, "eyes open and unconscious, sinking gently; air was coming out of his mouth. It was before I was born but I can remember it as clearly as if I saw it, and perhaps I did see it: I believe that an unborn baby had its eyes open and can look out through the walls of the mother's stomach, like a frog in a jar" (28). This dream at once conjures images of a pickled fetus and both death and dissolution, of joining with a greater body in the water—what Tolan describes as an "uncanny encounter . . . the drowned corpse is presumably her father's, but to the traumatized narrator it becomes the fetus she unwillingly aborted" (94).

To Tolan's reading I would add that the narrator also identifies with the fetus, in that she overlays several images, perspectives, and memories in this scene. First, she joins her own point of view with her mother's. Second, she conflates her brother with her own aborted fetus, "in a bottle curled up, staring out at me like a cat pickled; it had huge jelly eyes and fins instead of hands, fish gills" (144). She explicitly acknowledges this association; her initial misidentification of the shadow in the lake with her brother's

drowned body is what jolts her memory of the repressed procedure. She then identifies her mother/self with her brother/fetus as she imagines peering into the water, meeting the body's "eyes open and unconscious." The surface of the lake takes on the reflective properties of a mirror, so that she ultimately imagines narrator, brother, mother, and fetus collapsed into one body and one identity, a perspective from which she beholds herself as that fetus in the water. Lastly, she projects this composite onto her father's body.

In light of this series of projections and identifications, the indistinct mass at the bottom of the lake, her father's bloated and decomposing cadaver, appears to inspire not only the memory of abortion but also the imagination of intrauterine life and perspective. If the encounter with the drowned corpse/fetus is uncanny, the incident must by definition mark the return of something repressed. These passages suggest that what the narrator represses, and what returns, is not simply her memory of abortion, but a retroactive fantasy of oceanic experience as a fetus or infant. The lake takes on the characteristics of a womb to harbor a fetal, amphibious, and narcissistically expansive narrator.

Atwood repeats imagery of the intrauterine human as an amphibious creature, with "huge jelly eyes and fins instead of hands," throughout the novel. The narrator and others compare both the fetus and narrator to frogs. When the narrator impales one on a fishing line, Anna comments, "'God you're coldblooded' . . . The frog goes down through the water, kicking like a man swimming" (61). Anna's insult itself imagines the narrator as something bestial, more akin to frog—or fetus—than to Anna herself. As noted in Chapter 2, Karen Newman writes that representations of the fetus in the 1960s and 70s were visualized "via distancing codes of scientific omniscience, isolated from the female uterus and therefore cut off from any spatial identificatory cues" (16). Accompanying

commentary frequently observes that the fetus is indistinguishable from that of any other mammal's. *Surfacing*'s narrator likewise views her fetus, both the one she aborted and the one she believes she currently cultivates, as animalistic. But if the narrator seems to obscure her own personhood, as Newman suggests of fetal imagery, she erases herself only as a cohesive, singular self. She continues to feel herself to be intimately present, but she also imagines her matter to be dispersed, spread out across plants, animals, and soil.

The narrator is, after all, unsure if the fetus she aborted is "part of myself or a separate creature" (144). In imagining herself to be simultaneously mother and fetus, the narrator also collapses the distinction between the two. The fetus ceases to be a distinct entity; she imagines it as more of herself. In turn, she loses track of her own outlines, as she imagines herself a fetus suspended and nourished in the amnion of the lake, indistinguishable from the ecosystem that sustains her. The narrator does not conceive of a boundary either between herself and her fetus or between herself and her environment. From this perspective, her abortion would appear traumatic chiefly because her lover took a piece of her own self away from her. Her coerced abortion figuratively cut her in half, with the result that she feels fractured, no longer whole, because a piece of her own body, not a new one, was taken away. That piece returns precisely with her fantasy of a new fetus. When she returns to her parents' cabin after her submersion, she finds it empty and "different, larger, as though I hadn't been there for a long time: the half of me that had begun to return was not yet used to it" (149). She conceptualizes that other "half" as the likely nonexistent fetus in her womb, which she imagines not as a fetus but as a recovered portion of herself.

Likewise, she identifies herself, as a fetus in the womb of the lake, as a continuation of that ecosystem. The imaginary fetus, which is in her but also her, "buds, it sends out fronds. . . . In the morning I will be able to see it: it will be covered with shining fur" (165). Her fetus-self is simultaneously plant and animal; she imagines it sprouting and proliferating. The notion of reproduction gives way to what Donna Haraway refers to as "replication" (1968), to "metamorphosis" (*Surfacing* 171) and the ecological transmission of matter from one organism to another as they die and bloom. This redefinition decouples reproduction from insemination and pregnancy, and thence from any stable ideal of strictly defined biological womanhood. Furthermore, it conceives of all humans in terms of materiality and reproductive potential, as living or dead but always recycled and recycling matter.

The narrator rejects her identity as a woman even as she embraces her identity as a reproducer—a biological organism—specifically because this quality, she feels, is more of a generically human attribute than a particularly female one. And she specifically arrives at this conclusion via an indulgence in nature, the ecosystem writ large, as a basis for identity. In this respect, however, *Surfacing* predicts *Oryx and Crake* just as it does *The Handmaid's Tale*. Procreation in *Handmaid* is explicitly, even violently, linked to the female body, and women in turn defined entirely in terms of their reproductive capacity. Offred's commander lectures that Gilead has nobly "return[ed] things to Nature's norm" (285), and the handmaids' overseers instruct them to "[i]dentify with your body" (159), a directive which that novel frames as restrictive and totalitarian, but which *Surfacing*'s narrator nonetheless appears to follow of her own volition. But *Crake*, like *Surfacing*, foregrounds every human, at least among Crake's idealized "children," in terms of its

capacity to reproduce and populate. Atwood insinuates forces that lead the narrator to embrace such a redefinition, even if, as I will discuss below, its attendant de-individualization ultimately proves undesirable. The narrator's experience of the very notion of "woman" is circumscribed by the demands of husbands and lovers, and for this reason she comes to disavow gendered identity as a value attributed to and in excess of the organic material she takes to be genuinely inherent.

Expectation, Essence, and Environment

The narrator's reference to the "first true human" reads as an attempt to identify, reach, and claim a sense of essential identity, but the narrator does not specifically associate women with something more true, natural, or ecological than men. There is no difference between an essential man or an essential woman when one considers the most authentic thing about both their organic composition and location in the ecosystem. All the same, in *Surfacing* men furnish the catalyst for the narrator's search for what she refers to as a "whole" self. The narrator means her assumption of expansive identity to ferry her away from any stable definition of womanhood, precisely because she perceives womanhood as a series of expectations affixed to her by men who would seek to control that identity. If the narrator joins the "Canadian female protagonists" of the late twentieth century that Atwood observes "going off into the woods . . . to get *away* from a man" (*Strange Things* 101), she also initially intends this movement as an outright rejection of gender constructivism.

In particular, the man she wants to get away from is David, who uses the narrator's homecoming trip as an excuse to gather footage for a film project, *Random Samples*, a series of "shots of things they come across" (6). David's own expectations, definitions, and predilections underwrite the ostensibly natural appearance of each random sample. His

inclusion of his wife as a requisite "naked lady with big tits and a big ass" (135) simultaneously claims to represent Anna as she naturally is and to impose the very shape of that identity as David defines it, namely as an object of his and Joe's voyeuristic pleasure—the "pair of boobs" that he married (139). David's boisterous, countercultural bravado, which he frequently expresses in economic terms directed against "rotten capitalist bastard" Americans (8), conspicuously limns his chauvinism. He propositions the narrator by appealing to her as a liberated woman, the same vocabulary he uses when he encourages Anna to disrobe for the camera: "'You're a groovy chick, you know the score, you aren't married. . . . It'll be great, it's good for you, keeps you healthy'" (152). When she rejects him outright, he calls her a "'tight-ass bitch.'" That Atwood prominently juxtaposes David's radical sympathies with his crass sexism, so that these characteristics come together in the narrator's perception, speaks to the often-misogynistic rhetoric and behavior associated with the New Left, counterculture, and other movements, despite these groups' commitment to cultural revolution.[42]

What I mean to suggest is that political appeals to the unique selfhood of every individual vocalized in the radical political climate of the 1960s do not provide for the narrator any profound sense of liberation, meaning, or fulfillment because those appeals emanate from a mouthpiece of chauvinism, David, who would himself dictate the terms of both "liberation" and "woman." This detail highlights the narrator's intention not to embrace but to escape a fixed conception of women's identity, precisely because its characteristics have only ever been imposed upon her. The narrator's distrust adheres

[42] Griffin also makes this observation when working on the staff of an "American radical magazine," where she became "disturbed [by] a clearly prejudicial attitude which the radical employers had toward their female staff" (*Made* 4).

throughout her entire life, including her childhood. Her local Sunday school touted "Canadian Girls in Training" classes for demure and pious young ladies, the type the narrator once idolized in her scrapbooks, "holding up cans of cleanser, knitting, smiling, modeling toeless high heels and nylons with dark seams and pillbox hats and veils. A lady . . . was what you said you said at school when they asked you what you were going to be when you grew up" (91). If by adulthood the narrator had departed this more antique oppression for the city, she also finds in the metropole an equally rigid yet purportedly liberated set of expectations that follows her back home.

Until her experience beneath the lake, she papers over her past with just such an illusion of domesticity, dressing up her abortion as the birth of a child she later claims to have ceded to an equally invented husband. She ambivalently internalizes a sense of blame for her child's absence (which she imagines to be loss of custody) by justifying a certain model of respectable womanhood: "My bitterness about him surprised me: I was what's known as the offending party, the one who left, he didn't do anything to me. He wanted a child, that's normal, he wanted us to be married" (44). Her descent into the lake to find her father, however, dispels her fragile sense of insufficiently maternal identity.

Underwater, the narrator's vocabulary evokes excavation: "Pale green, then darkness, layer after layer, deeper than before, seabottom; the water seemed to have thickened" (143). She suggests that the deeper she digs into the water, the deeper she plumbs her own psyche, peeling back "layer after layer." The narrator's recollection of her abortion not only succeeds in concretizing the muddle of memories that confuse her identity, but also kicks off a series of attempts to go deeper, to access memories beneath memories, to reacquire a more natural sense of identity she believes known but forgotten.

If the narrator appears to recognize that there is nothing essential about her gendered identity, she also finds its construction so unappetizing that she feels she must eliminate the category of gender altogether. After she dumps David's film, liberating herself from the camera's imposition of her identity as David imagines it, she feels the sun "sear away the wrong form that encases me . . . I dip my head beneath the water . . . When I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface, a cloth decoy" (183). Her dissolution reads first and foremost as an act of shedding layers, casting off various jackets that others have sewn for her. She throws her false wedding ring into the fire so it will be "purified": "Everything from history must be eliminated" (181). She disrobes: "these husks are not needed any longer . . . When nothing is left intact and the fire is only smoldering I leave" (182). Her successive abandonment of false selves, represented variously throughout the novel by clothing, makeup, and the managed expression of expected feelings and emotions, occurs as the unmasking of repression, an attempt to reach an earlier, more natural identity beneath layers constructed according to standard. When she observes a drawing she made as a child of a "woman with a round moon stomach" and infant "sitting up inside her gazing out," she determines that her childhood interpretation of her own art, that the "baby was myself before I was born," was only "what the pictures had meant then but their first meaning was lost now" (159). She descries a hidden truth that predates even her youth, an understanding buried under the layers of identity she feels piled on top of her, the demure girlhood of childhood and sexy liberation of adulthood.

Because she perceives a disjunction between her true self and the figure she displays, she believes that everything she says, does, and feels is an act: "what to feel was

like what to wear, you watched the others and memorized it" (112).[43] "What to feel" is as much a matter of dress-up as the makeup Anna wears to maintain her relationship with David. "'You don't need that here,'" the narrator tells her, because "'there's no one here to look at you.'" Anna responds, "'He doesn't like to see me without it,' and then, contradicting herself, 'He doesn't know I wear it'" (41). Anna's maquillage expresses the misguided, coerced sort of identity the narrator believes she must strip away. Anna's "soul closed in the gold compact" (181); her identity is "a seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere . . . She is locked in, she isn't allowed to eat or shit or cry or give birth, nothing goes in, nothing comes out" (169). That Anna would wear makeup with no one to see her, and that David might not even know what Anna's face looks like without it, suggests to the narrator that artifice has erased and replaced who Anna truly and essentially is, obscuring the Anna who was born, who is uniquely and specially Anna. Makeup not only manufactures a particular woman for David's consumption, but also manifests a "gradual" social dissimulation that "takes a little of you at a time" and "leaves the shell" (169-70).

Both emotion and makeup read as expressions of expected social behavior, and as such untruthful to the animal the narrator knows she is. This preoccupation predicts a line from *The Handmaid's Tale*: "I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born" (86). Both the narrator of *Surfacing* and Offred, in this scene, seem to lament the managed impression of selfhood suggested in these passages. And yet Offred later privately

[43] This anxiety, the narrator's suspicion that she is merely acting rather than expressing some inherently true self, resonates with postwar dramaturgical accounts of selfhood, particularly Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956).

celebrates when gifted a tube of lipstick. To Offred, makeup does not represent a cage, or even a veneer of falsehood. In fact, the *absence* of such fixings read as a deprivation of selfhood, a dehumanization in its own right. Lipstick seems to her a small instrument of liberation, perhaps ineffectual yet also personally meaningful, that enables her to craft and take control of an identity that otherwise is entirely determined by the state. Gender constructivism, in this light, appears a positive, creative, and potentially consequential force. Offred momentarily becomes free to shape her identity in a context in which others ordinarily define her by her fruitfulness. Makeup becomes a tool for self-making; the notion of essence would seem entirely villainous by comparison. The self-determinative orientation of Atwood's later work illuminates the implications of *Surfacing*'s ambivalent conclusion, which sees the narrator retreat from her ecological identification in favor of the constructed identity she at first rebuffs.

An Appeal to Obliteration

At the end of Atwood's short story "Death by Landscape," the protagonist Lois observes her landscape paintings while recollecting her childhood friend Lucy's disappearance in the same lake country in which *Surfacing* takes place: "a dead person is a body; a body occupies space, it exists somewhere. You can see it; you put it in a box and bury it in the ground, and then it's in a box in the ground. But Lucy is not in a box, or in the ground. Because she is nowhere definite, she could be anywhere. . . . She is here. She is entirely alive" (110-11). This passage reflects Atwood's sentiment that in her earlier short fiction, predating *Surfacing*, "The only way the speaker could actually get into the landscape was by dying" (Hammond & Atwood 28). If the narrator of *Surfacing* seems to identify, on

some level, with that same landscape, she also comes to recognize death as the only means to sustain that identification.

The lake country ecosystem does not take on the significance of holism so much as it reveals itself to the narrator in its myriad transformations and reproductions, energy flowing from one organism to the next, especially as each dies and is consumed by another. On the shore, on the trees, "on the sodden trunks are colonies of plants, feeding on disintegration, laurel, sundew the insect-eater, its toenail-sized leaves sticky with red hairs. Out of the leaf nests the flowers rise, pure white, flesh of gnats and midges, petals now, metamorphosis" (171). The narrator considers her essence to consist of nothing more than her pounds of flesh, situated within an interpenetrative ecosystem; her body, like these plants, will in death experience continued life throughout the ecosystem.

She almost explicitly voices this association between identification with the ecosystem and death in her engagement with her parental phantoms, which, like the prenatal ones, accompany her ecological state: "To talk with them I must approach the condition they themselves have entered" (186). If she does not actively want to die, she does want to embody a particular vision of what she assumes death must be like. The "condition" of death lacks boundaries. Her parents' specters "can't be anywhere that's marked out, enclosed . . . they are against borders" (186). Her father's shade "has realized he was an intruder; the cabin, the fences, the fires and paths were violations; now his open fence excludes him . . . He wants it ended, the borders abolished, he wants the forest to flow back into the places his mind cleared" (192-3). The dead would appear to be spread out, dispersed across the forest. She laments having arranged her mother's conventional

burial because coffins exist “to lock the dead in, preserve them . . . they didn’t want them spreading or changing into anything else” (151).

The narrator’s initial anger and confusion at her parents’ death gives way not only to acceptance, but also to attraction. When word gets out that her father’s body has been found, her companions “find me inappropriate; they think I should be filled with death, I should be in mourning. But nothing has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive” (160). The novel understands death not as the snuffing out of an individual, but as its efflorescence, its expansion and dissemination across the ecosystem. To die is to enable one’s matter to keep living in new bodies. When the narrator finally beholds what she believes to be her father’s ghost, she declares that it does not take the man’s form, but the vague and unspecified shape of “what my father has become. I knew he wasn’t dead” (193). Her announcement that her father has not died reads not as a literal discovery, but as an affirmation that his matter circulates throughout the ecosystem, especially in the water of the lake but also in the soil, up through roots and into leaves and the bellies of mobile creatures, “back into the earth, the air, the water” (194).

The novel’s understanding of death as a facet of reproduction contributes to its destabilization of a coherent distinction between “inside” and “outside” and between the individual and its surroundings, and reinforces the narrator’s conviction that natural identity is something that reaches beyond the individual self to encompass an entire ecosystem. Even though she lives and breathes as a human individual, the narrator imagines that she is in the process of dying and transforming: “the swamp around me smolders, energy of decay turning to growth, green fire. I remember the heron; by now it will be insects, frogs, fish, other herons. My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal,

sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply" (172). Identity, following such an understanding, would appear to have little to do with particulars, preferences, choices, or expectations, and everything to do with sheer matter and its movement. Nature does define her identity, in that the novel understands essence as matter, and flesh as the most, if not only, natural aspect of the human individual.

In other words, Atwood dramatizes a suggestion that an appeal to the natural or authentic is indistinguishable from an appeal to the universal, in such a way that the individual is completely obliterated. This conclusion is strikingly similar to, albeit more seemingly desirable than, the social arrangements justified and obscured by the totalitarian and corporate propaganda of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*. Crake describes his progeny as "floor models" for genetic modification advertised to wealthy investors and parents; in reality, he means them to replace their violent forebears as earth's dominant species once he has deliberately wiped out the human population with a drug that purportedly enhances sexual excitement. Both Crake's intention and the lie he uses to cover it up strip any notion of personality, individuality, or self-identity from the human animal and define that creature by its materiality, especially its biological capacity for procreation. More conspicuous is the prayer Offred speaks at the conclusion of *Handmaid* out of desperation and acquiescence in the face of potential execution: "I'll obliterate myself, if that's what you really want; I'll empty myself, truly, become a chalice" (367). In a moment of fear, Offred offers to trade one form of annihilation for another, the cessation of her life in favor of the extinction of her personality. She risks an acceptance of her lot in life as a vessel, as woman identified entirely with ovary and womb. When the handmaids pray, "Oh God, obliterate me. Make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh, that I may be multiplied. Let me

be fulfilled" (251), they glorify the dissolution of selfhood in favor of their sheer bodily material in a way that validates the repressive regime under which they serve as incubators. Furthermore, Gilead is organized in such a way that these women are interchangeable. After the state executes Offred's confidant Ofglen, a new Ofglen takes her place; the handmaids' names are attached to patriarchs and refer to whichever handmaid happens to reside in each household at a given time.

These details, taken together, suggest that the definition of individuals by biology rather than personality de-emphasizes, if not destroys outright, the individual as such. At times Offred seems to internalize the doctrine impressed by Gileadean society that women equal their wombs, and that the woman herself, as womb, is an ecosystem: "I sink down into my body as into a swamp, fenland, where only I know the footing. Treacherous ground, my own territory. I become the earth" (95). Offred's muted horror and resigned acceptance of her station chillingly reflect the rhetoric employed by *Surfacing*'s narrator as she attempts to escape definitions of womanhood she feels restrictively applied to her. The difference between the two, however, is that if Offred suffers under a regime that de-individualizes her via appeals to nature, the narrator de-individualizes herself by way of similar, though by no means identical, appeals. Even if the narrator more or less successfully decouples sexual reproduction from her conception of her material essence, she nonetheless effaces herself as an individual in turning to the natural as a basis for identity.

Furthermore, Atwood seems to suggest that to take seriously, and follow through to its conclusion, an appeal to the natural, essential, or authentic is to ultimately, and perhaps unwittingly, make the claim that death is not only inevitable but also crudely

desirable. The narrator's de-individualized sense of self invites her death; to be truly spread out across the ecosystem, as she imagines she most naturally is and must be, is to let that ecosystem take of one's body what it will. And yet at the same time, moments of recoherence punctuate her merger: "I have to get up, I get up. Through the ground, break surface, I'm standing now; separate again" (188). Despite the extremity of her destruction, her rejection of identity is highly ambivalent; despite her desire to merge with the ecosystem, she finds this task impossible to complete because she necessarily maintains a perspective from which to effect her self-erasure. Her self reasserts itself. It demands that she "get up."

The narrator finds herself in a complex double-bind. She desires to sustain an expansive sense of selfhood, an expression of her natural, material identity; but in order to completely identify with the ecosystem, she must die. To maintain that perspective as a living creature that can in fact have a perspective, however, she obviously cannot die. And she does not want to die. She wants to express an essential identity that she cannot comprehend without the sense of selfhood—and all the experiences, predilections, and memories that go with it—that she considers a veneer obscuring her nature and tries to dismiss. Those moments of recoherence, during which her personality seems to reassert itself, signify her acknowledgment of this dilemma.

Ultimately, the narrator chooses life over a mortal embrace of the universal, a total de-individualization. It is striking that she stumbles out of the woods to resume a cohesive sense of self-identity, given the faith she initially places in her self-destruction. She speaks almost as if she dons a pair of shoes. She finds some footprints and "I place my feet in them and find that they are my own" (193). This line is significant in its inverted echo of the

narrator's earlier distaste for dress, makeup, and even feelings, the notion that her false identity is a "cloth decoy" to be shed in order to access the natural animal buried under the layers. The footprints are "my own." She declares a sensation of coherence, of being more or less "whole" not in terms of the ecosystem, but as an individual. Her earlier equation of clothing with identity constructed and made, rather than "natural," indicates that in this moment the narrator accepts the notion that presentation, choices, and convictions, while perhaps not as "natural" as flesh and blood, make up a sense of identity worth claiming.

The ease with which she slides back into what she earlier denounces seems almost disappointing; the conclusion, as Lecker has pointed out, seems both unsatisfying and incommensurate with the critical claim that the narrator finds herself and strengthens her sense of identity in the woods. If anything, her identity, as such, is even more uncertain. But that uncertainty, the novel leads us to believe, is what stands between the narrator and her extinction, which she invites in her pursuit of an expansive identification with the ecosystem. Atwood suggests that identity—gendered or otherwise—is properly conceived not as an expression of essence so much as a series of choices, experiences, and affiliations.

This slippery and contingent definition of the self as process rather than essence is one Atwood continues to take up and explore in her work. The narrator casually yet uneasily accepts that she must return "to the city and the pervasive menace, the Americans. . . . from now on I'll have to live in the usual way, defining . . . love by its failures, power by its loss, its renunciation" (195). There is "[n]o total salvation, resurrection" (196). This vision of subjectivity is relational and negative, defined not by what is essential about the narrator but by relationships, roles, and reactions. She even returns to Joe, who offers her "captivity in any of its forms, a new freedom," a decision she justifies with the conviction

that "he isn't an American . . . he isn't anything, he is only half formed, and for that reason I can trust him" (198). That the narrator considers Joe "half-formed," and that she believes this to be not only a respectable but also a desirable condition, further signals a refined understanding of identity, and even perhaps the necessity of a constructivist position to her survival. This is not to say that she throws out the perception of ecological connectivity that she has acquired. Her willing descent into self-obliteration occurs largely in response to the domination and imposed definition of not only women, but also the environment—the heron, trees, and lake, all ravaged by encroaching American tourism and industry. Moving forward, she "refuse[s] to be a victim" (197). If she accepts her identity as a constructed aspect of her person, she also determines to direct that construction herself, in defiance of men like David and her ex-lover, and economic forces that would dominate both women and other organisms.

As Barbara Gates writes, "inherent in ecofeminism is a belief in the interconnectedness of all living things" (20). And yet, "While emphasizing the connections and potential for communion between any group of humans and nonhuman nature is an important step toward overcoming the dualisms that structure our culture's thinking," Armbruster writes, "relying *only* on connection can collapse the self/other dualism into an undifferentiated whole. Such holism risks simply incorporating the other into the self" (101). Armbruster and Plumwood, among others, instead consider "how to negotiate connection and difference" (Armbruster 99), acknowledging "the other as neither alien to and discontinuous from self nor assimilated to or an extension of self" (Plumwood 6). This middle ground is precisely the uneasy territory into which the narrator has wandered. She intimately embraces what she considers the natural, ecological condition underlying

identity positions—that which is most authentically human. But she foregoes a complete dissolution, which would be to join her parents in death, in favor of this uncomfortable yet manageable position. Atwood's critique of de-individualization, which recurs throughout her body of work as an examination of appeals to nature, does not dismiss outright the universalizing concept of ecology in *Surfacing*, however. Rather, Atwood suggests that to recognize the material condition universal to the human species requires variably constructed positions of identity from which to do so.

CHAPTER 5

The Death of Alexander Supertramp: *Into the Wild*'s Ambivalent Ecological Consciousness

. . . the authentic inaugurating act of a would-be biocentrist should properly consist of suicide, since by staying alive he uses up another creature's resources—even its very life. . . . everybody is an anthropocentrist, except corpses pushing up daisies: they *are the real biocentrists, giving their all so others can live.*

Harold Fromm, "Aldo Leopold: Aesthetic 'Anthropocentrist'"

In this "void," this dynamic state of rest, without impediments, lies ultimate reality, and here one's own true nature is reborn.

Peter Matthiessen, *The Snow Leopard*

In the epigraph above, Peter Matthiessen proclaims that the origin of the "true nature" of the self lies, paradoxically, in succumbing to a "void." In Matthiessen's text, the void is a spiritual concept, and signifies the tangled inscrutability of a universe and ecosystem that constantly deny the very self he means to incubate. Matthiessen's rhetoric finds a social-psychological parallel in Ernest Becker's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Denial of Death* (1973), a psychoanalytically-charged response to and elaboration on work by midcentury sociologists such as William Hollingsworth Whyte, David Reisman, and C. Wright Mills. Becker explores fear of death as the central organizing condition of human culture and heroism as its narcissistic antidote, arguing that the "crisis of modern society is precisely that the youth no longer feel heroic in the plan for action that their culture has set up" (6). Becker makes an apparently contradictory claim about the role of life-preserving self-esteem, the narcissistic bastion of selfhood, in the face of homogenization. "The 'healthy' person, the true individual, the self-realized soul, the 'real' man, is one who has *transcended* himself" (86). How can a "'real' man" be a "true individual" if he has also,

we assume, has left that self behind as he transcends it? Such transcendence, Becker argues, is a "new reality" achieved

> by the destruction of the self through facing up to the anxiety of the terror of existence. The self must be destroyed, brought down to nothing, in order for self-transcendence to begin. Then the self can begin to relate itself to powers beyond itself. It has to thrash around in its finitude, it has to 'die,' in order to question that finitude, in order to see beyond it. . . . to absolute transcendence, to the Ultimate Power of Creation . . . (89)

This opaque process begins as the individual (read: man), by some unclear device (faith, Becker suggests, or perhaps even analysis), "breaks through the bounds of merely cultural heroism"—that is, the happy image of respectable middle class success—and "by doing so he opens himself up to infinity . . . He links his secret inner self, his authentic talent, his deepest feelings of uniqueness, his inner yearning for absolute significance" (91). This sort of argument is familiar. The lofty rhetoric of Becker's heroic, authentic spiritualism strongly resembles that of the ecological mysticism of a nature writer like Matthiessen or philosophers like Alan Watts or the deep ecologists. One need only substitute the word "ecosystem" for "Ultimate Power of Creation."

The messianic imagery of resurrection that lurks in Becker's text finds a recent and pervasive analogue in the story of Christopher McCandless, related and embellished in travelogue form by Jon Krakauer in *Into the Wild* (1996). In the summer of 1990, the twenty-two-year-old McCandless left his apartment near Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, after quietly donating his savings to charity. Over two years later, his body was found decomposing in an abandoned bus in the forest south of Denali in Alaska. In a letter to his friend Jan Burres dated 9 December 1991, McCandless references the accidental double-exposure of some of the film he carried with him, a "mistake [that] made for some interesting shots however, for I'm often shown walking on water, etc." (in Christopher

McCandless 100). His sister Carine explicitly compares her brother to Christ when he returns from his first cross-country trip after high school: "He was so extremely thin, with a full beard and haggard appearance. It made me wonder if this was what Jesus might have looked like after hanging on the cross" (Carine McCandless 61). Most strikingly, McCandless fancies himself a kind of superman, a resurrected ascetic icon—the Supertramp.

Krakauer details both McCandless' cross-country travels and his ambivalently grandiose self-representation in terms of a cultural narrative he suggests inspires in McCandless a stringent belief in a firm dualism between nature and civilization. McCandless believes that isolation in nature—separated from culture—is the only way to recover a true, natural self, in contradistinction to what he perceives as his false, socially mediated self, repressed by a postindustrial American wasteland obsessed with material consumption. The Alaskan bush, McCandless believes, represents a harmony within ecology somehow devoid of cultural influence, a wilderness somehow free of ideology. In Alaska, he is "free from society at last" (McCandless 175), able to begin his "real life" (Krakauer 168). Krakauer himself, however, appears to reject the dualism McCandless employs to distinguish between nature and culture, "real life" and artifice. He challenges McCandless' perceptions, as early as the first chapter questioning "the powerful cultural myth of the need or even possibility of being 'alone' in nature, underscoring the ways one's travels are always performed in relation to others" (Keirstead 296). *Into the Wild* foregrounds Krakauer's own awareness of the ways in which nature and culture, or the human and nonhuman, are not neatly divisible spheres, and positions Krakauer and

McCandless—both, to a great extent, characters pieced together by uncertain clues and memories—in dialogue.

Becker's passage above resonates with the contradictory connections among authenticity, ecology, and death that persist throughout *Into the Wild*. The book, expanded from a 1993 article in *Outside* magazine, has remained a bestseller since its publication (it is still ranked second in Amazon.com's "Travel Writing" category) and its 2007 adaptation to film by Sean Penn. Its continued success, accompanied by a rash of imitators following McCandless' footsteps, evidences widespread fascination with the young man's journey, and especially with his mysterious and, some have argued, anticipated death. A pictographic belt McCandless crafts under the tutelage of his friend Ron Franz boldly features his legal initials, C. J. M., surrounding a skull and crossbones—a symbol of his death as Christopher Johnson McCandless and resurrection as Alexander Supertramp, the self-styled alter ego he means to represent the paragon of authentic selfhood, unfettered by social custom. But his death and rebirth as the Supertramp take on more pressing significance within the ecological context he seeks in the Alaskan bush. McCandless not only places high value on both his sense of ascetic superiority and what he considers the purity of an ecosystem in which his selfhood vanishes—a contradiction common to many of this dissertation's texts—but also understands his Supertramp persona to be timeless, even immortal. That immortality manifests, as it does in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972), as the continuation of life after death, as dead matter repurposed throughout the ecosystem.

This chapter will address more directly a question the previous chapters have touched upon. What occurs when the imaginative and rhetorical exercise of self-dissolution

is taken to its physical extreme in biological death? We might consider death the most radical move possible in terms of biocentrism: the acceptance of ecology's distributive aspects and the conviction not only that one will die, but also that one's carcass will provide an inestimable service to the ecosystem postmortem. In *Into the Wild*, Krakauer represents McCandless' quest as one for the replete ecological identity with which the figures discussed previously in this dissertation have merely toyed, foregrounding McCandless' serious alignment of a dispersed, indistinct sense of selfhood with his wilderness locale. McCandless is a true believer. He believes his ego or self has dissolved and that he is no longer individual but dispersed throughout the ecosystem. And Krakauer indicates that, at the time of his death, McCandless decides not to take his own life but to let the natural (albeit unclear) death to which he falls prey run its course. McCandless ends his journey as a piece of meat, a fate Krakauer suggests is a more or less noble outcome in that McCandless has completed his quest. He has embraced a solely material identity devoid of self, dispersed throughout the ecosystem.[44] In turn, Krakauer himself explores what it means to die ecologically through the imaginative act of writing McCandless as a character.

I do not mean to suggest that McCandless, the person, wanted or expected to die. Krakauer adamantly contests the charge that McCandless was "bent on suicide from the beginning" (134), although over the past twenty years, Krakauer's speculation on the cause of McCandless' death has been vigorously contested by a number of locals, reporters, and filmmakers. Ron Lamothe, in his 2007 documentary *The Call of the Wild*, notes that Krakauer had not updated *Into the Wild* by the time of production to reflect new information relevant to McCandless' autopsy. And cause of death is not the only detail

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[44] Carine McCandless remarks that "Chris had left to find peace and happiness . . . I was glad he'd found what he was looking for," in response to his death (131).

disputed. Interviews with trappers who maintain a cabin mentioned in the text reveal that McCandless likely followed their dog trail to find the abandoned bus in which he died, a point Krakauer omits. But this omission strengthens Krakauer's representation of McCandless' conviction that he operated beyond human territory. This "idealized McCandless," Lamothe confesses, "matters most to me." That is, Lamothe is most fascinated not by Christopher McCandless the real person, but by Alexander Supertramp, a persona invented by McCandless but largely crafted by Krakauer. Many of the facts of the McCandless case remain disputed, but as Lamothe's own admission illustrates, the actual, historical series of events means little when analyzing Krakauer's work, which Krakauer himself acknowledges is at least in part a work of fiction imagined by the author. McCandless is always subject to the mediating presence of both Krakauer and his numerous other commentators.

McCandless is a character—the Supertramp figure the real McCandless invented—and a character who, as imagined by Krakauer, accepts his death as a final dissolution. By the same token, Krakauer himself becomes a character in this narrative as the author reflects on his experiences as a young man that overlap with McCandless'. Despite the author's showcase of McCandless' journals, interviews with people he met across the United States, and observations and memories about his places of adventure and refuge, the reader never quite receives McCandless' own account, but instead Krakauer's speculation and interpretation of McCandless' motives, ideas, and movements. Krakauer merely implies the extent of his guesswork. He notes that around May 1991, in Las Vegas, McCandless stopped taking photographs and keeping a journal, "a practice he didn't resume until he went to Alaska the next year. Not a great deal is known, therefore, about

where he traveled" during this time (38). But he makes no claim to distance. In his author's note, he writes of "vague, unsettling parallels between events in [McCandless'] life and those in my own." He doesn't "claim to be an impartial biographer," and "interrupt[s] McCandless's story with fragments of a narrative drawn from my own youth. I do so in the hope that my experiences will throw some oblique light on the enigma of Chris McCandless." If *Into the Wild*, as Christopher Keirstead writes, "stages the demise of the modern-day Crusoe and his attempts to erase or deny the historical, ideological, and textual footsteps he follows" (288), it does so through a conversation between two figures: Krakauer and the always-absent McCandless.

Krakauer develops McCandless' character not only through his writings and interactions, but also through a series of comparisons between McCandless and a number of "countercultural idealists" (72). These figures include the "Mayor of Hippie Cove," a bearlike man who in the 1980s remained in residence near a vagabond encampment at Cordova, Alaska, dedicating himself to Neolithic methods of survival; and John Waterman, an eccentric young mountaineer who climbed the south face of Denali in the winter of 1981 "with a minimum of food" because he "wanted to underscore the waste and immorality of the standard American diet" (78). Waterman's prophetic last words to his pilot, ''I won't be seeing you again,'" anticipate McCandless' final letter to his friend Wayne Westerberg: "Take care, it was great knowing you" (Krakauer 69). Krakauer most harshly reflects on an anonymous man who "passed through the village of Tanana [Alaska] in the early 1970s, who announced that he intended to spend the rest of his life 'communing with Nature,'" and among whose recovered belongings a search party discovered "a diary filled with incoherent rambling about truth and beauty and recondite ecological theory" (72). The

"recondite ecological theory" and the man's disappearance are important and, I would argue, related details. Taken together, they hint toward the same tenor of happy finality with which Waterman spoke his last words to his pilot—the gleeful sort of self-dismissal with which Matthiessen, as Chapter 2 notes, approaches the dangerous mountain steppes and the prospect of fatal bodily accumulation into the ecosystem. Krakauer's tongue-in-cheek reference to "recondite ecological theory" announces his own dismissive opinion of a certain environmentalist commitment to regression, the undoing of social forms in favor of the putatively pure and pre-civilizational. Krakauer would appear less skeptical of countercultural communitarianism than of the sort of ideas associated with deep ecology, a reservation I will discuss in more detail below.

Krakauer is less casually critical of the above figures' distaste toward wealth and industry, an aversion McCandless heartily shares. McCandless "believed that wealth was shameful, corrupting, inherently evil" (115). Shortly after commencing his university studies, "'Chris started complaining about all the rich kids at Emory'" (123). Krakauer notes that several years prior to his graduation, McCandless had announced that "he would no longer give or accept gifts. Indeed, Chris had only recently upbraided [his parents] Walt and Billie for expressing their desire to buy him a new car as a graduation present and offering to pay for law school" (20). McCandless worries that if he accepts, "*they will think they have bought my respect*" (21). While working for his friend Westerberg in Carthage, Missouri, in the spring of 1992, he incorporates an anti-establishment message in the center of a doodle: "DOWN WITH THE PROGRAM!" (in Christopher McCandless 147). McCandless' "seemingly anomalous political positions" are mercurial at best, but always emphasize the diminution of government control. Despite the fact that he "was a vocal

admirer" of Ronald Reagan, however, his fierce anti-centralism reads more like Murray Bookchin's ecological anarchism. On the one hand, Chris comments, when asked if he carries a hunting license, "'Hell, no. . . . How I feed myself is none of the government's business. Fuck their stupid rules" (6). On the other, his boisterous libertarianism is tempered by avid civic-mindedness and revolutionary fervor, as when he "spoke seriously to his friends about smuggling weapons" into South Africa to aid "the struggle to end apartheid" (113). This is not to say that Krakauer paints McCandless as a latter-day New Leftist or countercultural icon. But the above details foreground the fact that though McCandless looks for guidance to writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Jack London, Boris Pasternak, Leo Tolstoy, and Henry David Thoreau), his approach to wilderness takes as one major thread of inspiration the confluence of postwar radical movements organized around issues of alienation, authenticity, and ecology.

The anti-industrial impetus behind McCandless' white, upper-middle class malaise, though indeed reflective of turn-of-the-century preservationism, is more representative of the existentialist alienation of selfhood felt by the equally white and middle-class Movement of the 1960s. If McCandless idolizes (and frequently misreads) writers like London and Thoreau, he does not quite fall into the tradition of romantic idealism, or embody a "philosophic defense of the half-savage," as Roderick Nash puts it (*Wilderness* 94). Instead, he goes whole hog. McCandless believes his self or ego has actually dissolved and that he is no longer individual, but dispersed throughout the ecosystem. At the outset of his account, Krakauer writes that McCandless changed his name, donated his life's savings, and hitched cross-country to Alaska "in search of raw, transcendent experience" (23). McCandless himself, in journals and conversation with people across the United

States, expresses his intention in even vaguer terms. He desires to be “free to wallow in unfiltered experience.” The expansiveness of his proclamations, coupled with Krakauer’s repetitive imagery of submersion and dispersal, voices a desire not merely to affirm one’s inextricable place in the ecosystem, but to *be* the ecosystem. McCandless effaces his sense of self-identity in favor of identification with the ecosystem as a whole; he subordinates selfhood to an ideal of holistic interconnectivity. In this way, he believes he has sacrificed a repressed and limited sense of self for an identity more real, more natural. This goal is one he can never quite achieve, but he *believes* that he achieves it.

He also fervently presumes a “vital need for wilderness, wild places, to help [him] become more mature,” in the divisive way deep ecologists Bill Devall and George Sessions imagine wilderness (111). Unlike for Edward Abbey, for McCandless civilization is *always* an alienating concept. There are no alternatives. Krakauer frames his own tale of near-death experience, on the other hand, with an anecdote that illustrates a wavering in his ascetic commitment to wilderness isolation, which like McCandless he once invested with a sense of wholeness and plenitude, of dispersed ecological selfhood. The night before he attempts to climb Devils Thumb, south of Juneau, Alaska, Krakauer stays in the home of a local woman. The experience rattles him: “I had convinced myself for many months that I didn’t really mind the absence of intimacy in my life, the lack of real human connection. But the pleasure I’d felt in this woman’s company—the ring of her laughter, the innocent touch of a hand on my arm—exposed my self-deceit” (137). While “real human connection” escapes clear definition, Krakauer’s admission of melancholy signals a recognition of his inability to distance himself from human contact on his journey, even as an unexpressed desire *not* to achieve such distance.

I argue that Krakauer, in investing McCandless with genuinely felt erasure of ego, crafts a dialogue between the Supertramp and Krakauer characters, in which he uneasily seeks to address the oscillating tension between selfhood and ecology. By positioning himself in conversation with the always-absent McCandless, Krakauer stages an unresolved debate between two different wilderness philosophies. The first is McCandless', which relies on a sharp division between nature and culture to conceptualize a "natural" identity totally spread across the ecosystem, within a wilderness supposedly divorced from the repressive machinations of civilization. The second is Krakauer's, which views nature and culture as falsely divided concepts, an approaches socially constructed selfhood as an inescapable condition. Krakauer shakily embraces an always necessarily ambivalent ecological consciousness. Ambivalence is required, *Into the Wild* suggests, for a meaningful relationship with both the environment and other people; the alternative, McCandless demonstrates, is death.

The next section of this chapter will examine the often-contradictory logic by which McCandless approaches his wilderness isolation as an authentic experience in contradistinction to the moneyed artifice of his family life. The following section will explore the psychoanalytical narrative with which McCandless' story resonates as he attempts to erase his sense of selfhood while also, paradoxically, building up a grandiose ascetic self characterized by the ecosystem in its entirety. The chapter concludes by examining the rhetorical overlap between McCandless' approach to selfhood and deep ecological philosophy, whose popularity preceded McCandless' own by only several years. Krakauer contests deep ecological dogma through his ambivalent perspective toward identity and his implicit thesis regarding McCandless' death: that in dying the Supertramp

succeeds in holistically identifying with the ecosystem in the only way possible—as carrion.

The Ascetic Superhero's Boast

A collection of McCandless' photographs and writings, compiled in close consultation with his parents and entitled *Back to the Wild: The Photographs and Writings of Christopher McCandless* (2011), prefaces its content with a "Note of authenticity," in which Joseph Moss, the collection's photo editor, claims, "The images on the cover and inside of this book are Christopher Johnson McCandless' photographs as he saw his world during his two-year journey. None of Chris' images were manipulated or retouched for this book." The volume treats these images as spontaneous representations of McCandless in the wild, even in those frames he has very clearly staged, or for which he poses (in one such image, he moodily glances toward the sunset as the camera captures his profile). Many of these photos, shot on 35mm film, are also overexposed or double-exposed, superimposing him on two landscapes at the same time. Despite the fact that McCandless himself extensively manipulates these images' content, the book presents itself as a collection of impartial wildlife photography, observing an unrestrained creature in its natural habitat.

The disjunction between McCandless' claims to authenticity and the highly contrived media of his self-representation, even by the meager resources available to him, serves as one facet of the complex relationship the character has with the notion of the "natural," and signals one of *Into the Wild*'s most forceful subtexts: that McCandless largely invents what he considers to be natural throughout his entire adventure, and takes part in a longstanding discourse of natural wilderness in opposition to fabricated civilization. Beneath an image dated 8 July 1990, the photographic volume reports that

McCandless' "new name 'Alexander Supertramp' reflects his realized self-image" (2). Yet the more emphatically McCandless (or his curators) tries to stage these photos to portray something putatively authentic about his sojourn in the wilderness, the less spontaneous the photos themselves turn out to be. The same is true for his journals, which the text accompanying these images attempts to replicate in McCandless' stilted, third-person present tense. It is unclear if these entries are McCandless' own, the mediating words of his father Walt, or the guiding interpretation of one or more of the volume's many editors; the voice seems left intentionally ambiguous in order to lend another veneer of realism to the photographic timeline. Editorial notes interspersed throughout the text—"he does not set the date stamp so the exact dates of the pictures that follow are deduced from corollary information" (106)—vie for authorial primacy with jubilant cries—"a trip to Alaska!"—that intimate the joy of a first-person adventurer. Krakauer's own reproductions of McCandless' journal entries read similarly: "*He lived on the streets with bums, tramps, and winos for several weeks. Vegas would not be the end of his story, however*" (37). McCandless' journals take the perspective of the disinterested observer, a rhetorical move intended to spice the genuine flavor of the journey.

Despite the lofty prose of the journal, which "often veers toward melodrama, the available evidence indicates that McCandless did not misrepresent the facts; telling the truth was a credo he took seriously" (Krakauer 29). This commitment jives with what almost all of his cross-country acquaintances remember as his strong, yet unclearly elaborated, moral code. "'He was what you'd call extremely ethical,'" Westerberg tells Krakauer (18). During McCandless' final stint in the continental states, as he saved up cash

for his trip north working for Westerberg in Carthage, Missouri, he sketched on a blank sheet of paper an "Aesthetic Creed" (in Christopher McCandless 148):

> I AM REBORN
> THIS IS MY DAWN
> REAL LIFE
> HAS JUST BEGUN.
>
> *DELIBERATE LIVING: CONSCIOUS ATTENTION TO THE BASICS OF LIFE, AND A CONSTANT ATTENTION TO YOUR IMMEDIATE ENVIRONMENT AND ITS CONCERNS …
> ABSOLUTE TRUTH AND HONESTY.
> REALITY
> INDEPENDENCE
> FINALITY-STABILITY-CONSISTENCY

When McCandless arrives in Alaska in late April, he jots down a similar Thoreauvian message: "*I am reborn. This is my dawn. Real life has just begun. Deliberate living: Conscious attention to the basics of life, and a constant attention to your immediate environment and its concerns*" (in Krakauer 168). The words "Reality," "Truth," and "Real" repeat among McCandless' numerous messages, in books or on buses, and indicate a conscious effort at rhetorical self-representation as having recovered some natural identity his peers repress. His professed dedication to an inscrutable "truth" aligns with the stolid values he derives from his literary heroes, especially Thoreau. He takes as his roadmap the codes well-published figures established before him, which he elevates to universal significance. Krakauer's pointed observation that McCandless entirely ignores his literary heroes' own hypocrisies (such as the fact that London only spent a single winter in the north) highlights the extent to which McCandless discursively constructs both this "truth" and the wilderness to which he appeals.

McCandless brings the values he selects from these writers to bear on all of his relationships, especially with his parents. McCandless' commentators (including the

reluctant Krakauer) have dedicated a great deal of attention to analyzing and psychologizing the relationship between Chris and Walt. Krakauer traces McCandless' problems with authority and government back to his disagreements with his father. The most compelling detail of this interpretation is Krakauer's suggestion that Chris comes to identify Walt's financial success and upper middle-class solidity with his hypocrisies and secrets. The young man's anger is rooted primarily in his sudden consciousness of and consequent dissatisfaction with repression. His outspoken issues with his father do not arise until he discovers, by chance, that Walt maintained two families without divorcing his first wife for many years after Chris was born, a fact both Walt and his wife Billie intended to keep hidden indefinitely.

McCandless directs his anger at his father's artifice, which he understands as a repression of the fractured nature of his family, and associates this duplicity with his father's charm, success, and wealth. In her memoir *The Wild Truth* (2014), Carine recalls that her brother complained that their parents "'brainwash themselves into this false sense of security and satisfaction by falling back on their *treasured money* and worthless luxury expenditures to shield themselves from reality. . . . It's like a disease. They invent an alternate reality and dedicate themselves to it completely'" (99). This diatribe marks one of many occasions in these texts when Chris refers to his parents' lifestyle as a "disease." After learning that he and his sister are technically illegitimate, contra the official family history his parents provided, he tells Carine in a letter that "[t]*hey are just totally beyond hope and there is no way to ever bring them back to reality. . . . it's like a disease which can be caught, if one is exposed to it too long then one will begin to feel its detrimental effects upon one's own soul*" (96). In other letters, he hopes to "*finally shake them into*

some kind of reality." These exchanges between Chris and Carine, as well as the "creed" partially reproduced above, highlight one of McCandless' favorite words: "real." In the margin of one of the books found with his body, McCandless scrawled, "RELATIONSHIPS: THOSE REAL / THOSE FALSE" (in Carine McCandless 139). It is difficult to qualify what renders a relationship "real" for McCandless, especially given that he takes comfort in "the purity of nature rather than human relationships," according to Carine (138). The second half of this division is far clearer in its reference to the qualities McCandless associates with his parents: deceit and wealth. Krakauer suggests that McCandless' quest arises largely out of an identification of wealth and civility—the cornerstones of his father's civilization—with repression and artifice. His investment in nature/culture dualism facilitates his identification of the natural half of this binary as the conceptual location of "real," as opposed to artificial, identity.

Krakauer, in focusing so much attention on Chris' relationship with Walt, his angst, and his hardheaded adolescence, shares the habit typical of his commentators of psychologizing McCandless, even as he condemns such criticism.[45] To psychoanalyze McCandless is to direct attention away from the fact that he exists as a character in Krakauer's text, and to obscure or downplay the role of the cultural narrative in which that character participates. Krakauer himself seeks to examine that narrative by drawing attention to the dualism in which McCandless so fervently believes and rejecting the charge that he was merely "a narcissist who perished out of arrogance and stupidity" (184). He

[45] A representative example is Martin Jordan's brief examination of *Into the Wild* in terms of pathological narcissism, a reading of McCandless' story as a "quest for a reciprocal independence with nature" that "became distorted by an unacknowledged rage at the human world" and which "in some senses was an attempt to compensate for the disappointment he felt with both society and the fallibility of human love, the disappointments of dependency and intimacy" (29).

believes McCandless to be neither arrogant nor stupid. "It probably misses the point," he writes, "to castigate McCandless for being ill prepared. . . . he was fully aware when he entered the bush that he had given himself a perilously slim margin for error. He knew precisely what was at stake" (182). McCandless seems almost purposefully unprepared. "Alex's backpack looked as though it weighed only twenty-five of thirty pounds, which struck [Jim] Gallien," the trucker who dropped McCandless off at the Stampede trailhead, "as an improbably light load for a stay of several months in the backcountry" (4). And Krakauer writes that "*by design* McCandless came into the country with insufficient provisions, and he lacked certain pieces of equipment deemed essential by many Alaskans" (180; emphasis added). McCandless' detractors believe that he "possessed insufficient respect for the land" (Krakauer 181), a charge of arrogance Krakauer challenges by comparing McCandless's demise to colonial wilderness disasters. Rather than approach nature "as an antagonist that would inevitably submit to force, good breeding, and Victorian discipline," McCandless "went too far in the opposite direction. He tried to live entirely off the country—and he tried to do it without bothering to master beforehand the full repertoire of crucial skills" (182). Krakauer seems to suggest that far from being arrogant, McCandless displayed *exactly enough* respect for the land in leaving open the possibility of his death, which he acknowledges in what *Back to the Wild* refers to as his "prophetic" final postcard to Westerberg: "If this adventure proves fatal and you don't ever hear from me again, I want you to know you're a great man" (Krakauer 69).

If McCandless did not intend to die, his character nonetheless recognizes the very present possibility that he might. Krakauer appears to believe McCandless' level of preparation beside the matter. Like other countercultural tramps, McCandless "was a

seeker and had an impractical fascination with the harsh side of nature," but though he "was rash, untutored in the ways of the backcountry, and incautious to the point of foolhardiness, he wasn't incompetent—he wouldn't have lasted 113 days if he were" (8). In other words, Krakauer writes as if McCandless is different or notable precisely because he more or less knows what he is doing but he vanishes anyway, a perspective that deviates markedly from the belief that "the boy had been bent on suicide from the beginning" (134). Krakauer never explicitly makes this suggestion, but his extended meditation on McCandless' similarities to Everett Ruess strengthens this claim. Ruess, who disappeared in Utah's Davis Gulch in 1934, wrote in his last letter to his brother Waldo, "*Do you blame me for staying here, where I feel that I belong and am one with the world around me?*" (in Krakauer 87). He expresses this sentiment in more mortal terms in others of his letters: "*when the time comes to die, I'll find the wildest, loneliest, most desolate spot there is*" (91). Ruess' words anticipate the ideal funeral described by Abbey, for whom "falling off [a] horse, dying there on the sand, under the sun, among the flies and weeds and indifferent cattle. . . . seems like a decent, clean way of taking off, surely better than the slow rot in an oxygen tent with rubber tubes stuck up your nose, prick, asshole" (*Desert Solitaire* 94).

Ruess also resembles McCandless in his effort at self-erasure. Shortly before his disappearance, Ruess "twice etched the name Nemo—Latin for 'nobody'—into the soft Navajo sandstone" (93) of the gorge—"no doubt moved by the same impulse that compelled Chris McCandless to inscribe 'Alexander Supertramp/May 1992' on the wall of the Sushana bus" (89). Like McCandless' assumption of the Supertramp mantle, Ruess' graffiti declares the "competitive dimension of asceticism" (Roorda 151), what Geoffrey Galt Harpham refers to as "the far from idle boast of one monk to another: 'I am deader

than you'" (26). McCandless intends his disposal of formally recognized identity to convey formlessness and fluidity. When Gallien asks for his name, he responds that he is "Just Alex." The moniker also ironically announces McCandless' presence, and brags of his perceived status as the ultimate loner, an ascetic superhero.

This rebaptism doubly dispels the self and yet shores it up to mythic proportions. While attempting to embody what he believes to be a paramount, natural identity that is essentially self-less, McCandless nevertheless asserts a name for himself and makes of himself a cultural icon. The ascetic superhero's boast is a paradoxical enunciation that encapsulates an impulse to both self-aggrandizement and self-erasure in an isolated wilderness assumed to induce that dubiously twofold self-representation. This same, contradictory intention to represent oneself as simultaneously grandiose and irrelevant manifested more recently in Timothy Treadwell, the subject of Werner Herzog's 2005 documentary *Grizzly Man*, who died on the Alaskan peninsula alongside his companion Amie Huguenard at the paws of his ursine friends in 2003. As Herzog narrates, Treadwell "stylized himself as Prince Valiant, fighting the bad guys with schemes to do harm to the bears." In one scene, Treadwell ventriloquizes a fox to vicariously proclaim himself "the ruler of all foxes and all bears." Like McCandless and Ruess, Treadwell has a flair for the boast: "I am right on the precipice . . . Come here and try to do what I do. You will die." Also like McCandless and Ruess, so will he. He similarly tempers his lofty self-image with self-erasure. Herzog tells viewers, "There was a desire in him to leave the confines of his humanness. . . . Treadwell reached out, seeking a primordial encounter." An ecologist interviewee reads aloud a letter in which Treadwell declares, "I have to mutually mutate

into a wild animal to handle the life I lead"—a project the ecologist describes as a religious sense "of connecting so deeply that you're no longer human."[46]

Both McCandless and Treadwell's off-putting identifications with nothingness resonate strongly with the "oceanic feeling" discussed previously that Sigmund Freud describes as "a sensation of 'eternity'" (24). For Freud, such a feeling refers to religious sentiment, an outpouring of beatific yet infantile communion that might exist in "counterpart" to the civilized ego as a feeling of "limitlessness and of a bond with the universe." By erasing from his identity the formal mark of civilization—his legal name—McCandless believes he begins to construct a situation in which he might be everything and nothing at once, devoid of self, at one with the wild; and yet he also might *be* the wild, an expanded self spanning his environment.

Narratives of Natural Identity

In 1967, Richard Proenneke settled in the Twin Lakes region of Alaska, 170 miles west of Anchorage, where he built a cabin that he lived in for the following thirty-one years. Proenneke's first few seasons in the backcountry are chronicled by Sam Keith in *One Man's Wilderness: An Alaskan Odyssey* (1973), which Keith derives from Proenneke's journal entries. The fifty-year-old man was remarkably transparent about his economy (in the Thoreauvian sense), and he clearly distinguishes between what he gathers from the land and constructs of his own two hands, and what he has brought with him from the nearest settlement, Port Alsworth, or had delivered to him. His cabin would doubtless have been far less functional, by his own admission, without "the glass window . . . flown in" or the

[46] Herzog highlights the consistent impression among Treadwell's commentators—especially the grizzly experts who inhabit the peninsula region—that despite his convictions, Treadwell was an invader who did more harm than good by dangerously acclimating bears to the scent and impression of humans more likely than not to harm them.

“Mylar thermopane [that] had been better for my needs” (209). While Proenneke laments what he sees as Americans’ proclivity for “expanding their needs until they are dependent on too many things and too many other people,” he is up front about the fact that he, too, has need of the fruits of human technology for survival. The primary difference between Proenneke and McCandless, both Alaskan immigrants, is that where Proenneke unashamedly takes ownership of his reliance, however limited, on human industry, McCandless voraciously denies his use of these technologies, or any need for them to begin with. *Into the Wild* emphasizes that McCandless, in his journals and letters, crafts a narrative that his adventure, at least when arrives in Alaska, is somehow entirely extra-civilizational, devoid of human technological influence. In Alaska, he is “free from society at last” (Christopher McCandless 175).

Krakauer draws a parallel between this omnipresent, ideological civilization/nature dualism and a second, psychic self/non-self dualism, an alliance found also in classical psychoanalytic philosophy. *Into the Wild* understands the Supertramp myth in terms that resonate with the Freudian logic that formed a cornerstone of social theory prominent among intellectuals influential to the Movement of the 1960s and 70s. McCandless’ alignment of instinct and fulfillment with nature, and repression and frustration with civilization, reflects the enduring representation of nature/culture dualism imagined by Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). The tensions among the terms of Freud’s developmental schema illuminate the contradictions that surface within McCandless’ wilderness logic.

Freud argues that the individual sacrifices the joys of infantile narcissism for the realities of ego development and thence the protections of organized civilization.

Humankind, he writes, strives above all to be happy, a project that pursues both a positive and negative aim: to both experience strong feelings of pleasure and to eliminate threatening feelings of pain (42). The pleasure principle dictates that the individual pursue those feelings of pleasure, and this project, for Freud, "dominates the operation of the mental apparatus from the start," though "its program is at loggerheads with the whole world" (43). This impasse arises because to pursue "unrestricted satisfaction" headfirst, despite being "the most enticing method of conducting one's life," would be to self-destructively place "enjoyment before caution" (44-5). The ego forms partially as a defense to separate the self from anything that might be a source of pain. The origins of suffering number three: from within the body, from the external world, and from harms caused by other people. To curtail such pain, one comes to "differentiate between what is internal—what belongs to the ego—and what is external—what emanates from the outer world" (28). This discriminatory approach to boundaries marks the introduction of the reality principle. As the realities of need, and of others' needs, continue to violate omnipotent perceptions, the individual enters into social contract and accepts civilization to curb the excesses of pleasure.

This sacrifice produces a tension between individual and society that tears the individual between his or her own desires and the pressures of civilization. The price of civilization is diminishment, as "[t]he feeling of happiness derived from the satisfaction of a wild instinctual impulse untamed by the ego is incomparably more intense than that derived from sating an instinct that has been tamed" (48). This introduction of boundaries polices a line not only between self (ego) and other, but also between nature and civilization. The state of nature at the heart of this developmental saga privileges an

overflowing of pleasure and gratification unseen on the civilizational pole of the same scale, which diminishes that pleasure. Krakauer represents McCandless' philosophy in almost identical terms. For McCandless, the dispersed pleasures of ecological interconnectivity are more real than any reality principle of civilization, which comprises artifice, wealth, and waste.[47] McCandless' philosophy aligns ego fluidity with "nature" and separates these terms from "civilization," just as Freud aligns the pre-civilizational with the gratifications of an expansive ego and the civilizational with the sacrifice of a limited ego. McCandless strives for personal fulfillment and gratification premised, paradoxically, on the diminishment of the boundaries of that very personality. Krakauer frames this dissolution in terms of the interconnectivity of ecology, within the environment of Denali.

Freud himself briefly entertains the choice of rejecting human company to combat the experience of pain: "Against the suffering which may come upon one from human relationships the readiest safeguard is voluntary isolation . . . Against the dreaded external world one can only defend oneself by some kind of turning away from it, if one intends to solve the task by oneself" (45). McCandless does indeed intend to solve the task by himself, taking great pains to fabricate a narrative in which his environment is devoid of all human influence. He "'didn't want to see a single person, no airplanes, no sign of civilization. He wanted to prove to himself that he could make it on his own, without anybody else's help'" (Krakauer 159). And yet the contradiction at the heart of McCandless' narrative is his self-proclaimed identity as the ultimate loner (the Supertramp), which is nonetheless constantly

[47] It is worth noting that for Freud pleasure principle organization is principally characterized by the *illusion* of omnipotence and dispersal.

in the process of being forged by the brief yet intense relationships he makes along the way, and the more enduring ones he experiences with his literary heroes.[48]

Freud's passage above begs the question of what, exactly, the "external world" comprises. Freud seems to collapse "human relationships" and "external world" into one another—the source of harm directed against the self seems to stem from an environment defined by its human character. The "external world," in other words, includes the human as well as the nonhuman. Despite this characterization, Freud endorses fraternization. There is "another and better path" than turning away from one's neighbors, "that of becoming a member of the human community, and . . . going over to the attack against nature and subjecting her to the human will" (45). One might say that Freud, like McCandless, weds civilization to ecological degradation (even if the idea of "ecological degradation" as such does not exist in 1930). But this alliance is for Freud a relatively positive development (nature is, after all, one of the three sources of pain against which the ego defines itself). And yet the state of nature predating the limited gratification of the reality principle is also a realm of pleasure. Both "nature" and "civilization," though divided along the blurry line between pleasure and reality principles, are by Freud's logic ambivalent concepts that invoke both pleasure and pain, even if civilization yields the greater return on repressive investment. McCandless, on the other hand, would prefer to dispense with the human element altogether; he envisions a return to the pre-civilizational state of "natural" narcissism, "wallow[ing] in unfiltered experience." In other words, while for Freud civilization operates like a vaccine—a small harm meant to forestall greater

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[48] Burres "makes it clear that he was no recluse: 'He had a *good* time when he was around people, a *real* good time'" (Krakauer 44). His amicability recalls Abbey's seemingly contradictory words regarding human company in *Desert Solitaire* (1968).

pain—for McCandless a civilization defined by repression is itself the chief harm plaguing the individual.

Despite the fact that McCandless "entertained no illusions that he was trekking into a land of milk and honey," Krakauer represents his sojourn as diffuse with an indistinct, pervasive pleasure. In his interviews with numerous individuals across the American landscape who came into contact with McCandless, Krakauer emphasizes their impression of McCandless' sheer *joy*. Gallien met not a world-weary vagabond but an eager young boy: "'The word that comes to mind is *excited*. He couldn't wait to head out there and get started'" (6). After this final conversation, McCandless sets off on the Stampede Trail: "smiling broadly, he disappeared down the snow-covered track" (7). This seeming contradiction recalls Harpham's work on ascetic commitment, which "in the loose sense . . . refers to any act of self-denial undertaken as a strategy of empowerment or gratification" (xiii). At the same time, Harpham points to the ascetic discipline of self-denial as the cornerstone of ethics and social cohesion, as a resistance against what Augustine calls "nature and nature's appetites" (xii). This aspect of asceticism evokes Freud's accounts of the birth of civilization and individual civiliz*ing*, and indeed Harpham, working through Julia Kristeva, discusses the centrality of ascetic renunciation to the doctrine of primary repression. Significantly, he writes that as a result, "an integral part of the cultural experience is a disquiet, an ambivalent yearning for the precultural, postcultural, anticultural, or extracultural" (xii).

These claims illustrate a degree of ambivalence central to Harpham's understanding of the ascetic. If the smooth operation of human culture relies on ascetic self-renunciation—that is, a renunciation of the full pleasure available to a person—how does

the exercise of asceticism also signify the pursuit of a degree of gratification? Krakauer's narrative further complicates this ambivalence, and turns Harpham's definition on its head. Harpham clearly invokes gratification in a different register from that of the pleasure of Augustine and Freud's "nature." Krakauer's representation of McCandless' quest, on the other hand, unifies ascetic ambivalence with gratification as the very pleasure that social and ethical asceticism, in Harpham's terms (and Freud's), represses. In other words, for a wilderness ascetic such as McCandless, the civilizing relinquishment of pleasure circles around on itself and reverses its terms. McCandless intends his brand of disavowal to separate him instead *from* civilization and return him to that "natural" and ego-indistinct pleasure—as Randall Roorda puts it, a "movement away from 'habit' and 'appetite'" that is "not 'nature's' but 'society's'" (9). McCandless' "apparent sexual innocence," Krakauer writes,

> is a corollary of a personality type that our culture purports to admire, at least in the case of its more famous adherents. His ambivalence toward sex echoes that of celebrated others who embraced wilderness with a single-minded passion—Thoreau (who was a lifelong virgin) and the naturalist John Muir, most prominently—to say nothing of countless lesser-known pilgrims, seekers, misfits, and adventurers. . . . McCandless seems to have been driven by a variety of lust that supplanted sexual desire. . . . McCandless may have been tempted by the succor offered by women, but it paled beside the prospect of rough congress with nature, with the cosmos itself. (66)

On the one hand, Krakauer's rhetoric echoes Abbey's insinuation that male wanderers fuck their way into sensations of ecological dispersal. On the other, this kind of metaphorical copulation also evokes the relations imagined by the narrator of *Surfacing*, an intimacy beyond the merely sexual that also includes decay. Krakauer represents McCandless' desire as pre-sexual, spread out, and encompassing of the polymorphously perverse pleasures experienced by the ego-less infant of Freud's theory.

If McCandless appears to commit to solitude in relation to human civilization, he also embraces a notion of community beyond the human and even the boundaries of his ego. Krakauer's evocation of dissolution suggests that McCandless does not depart from human civilization to be alone, but to be coextensive with everything. As such, just as Freud muddles human and nonhuman elements in his disquisition on pain, McCandless can never fully separate the human from the nonhuman in his flight from civilization. He must repetitively fabricate that boundary so that, for him, it always seems as if he is crossing a border. McCandless does recognize the persistence of human civilization in the natural world, but forcibly resists these artifacts by structuring his own perception of nature as undiscovered and pure:

> In coming to Alaska, McCandless yearned to wander uncharted country, to find a blank spot on the map. In 1992, however, there were no more blank spots on the map—not in Alaska, not anywhere. But Chris, with his idiosyncratic logic, came up with an elegant solution to this dilemma: He simply got rid of the map. In his own mind, if nowhere else, the *terra* would thereby remain *incognita*. (Krakauer 174)

McCandless betrays his recognition that nature is by no means a pure Eden untouched by the civilization he flees, but he constantly pushes back against this knowledge in order to re-structure nature as a region independent of human influence. It is perhaps for this reason—McCandless' seeming awareness yet rejection of his implication in a discourse, not material reality, of wilderness isolation—that Krakauer approaches McCandless not as an incompetent naïf, but "as a member of a well-established fraternity of adventurers who look to wilderness for meaning and purpose they cannot find in civilization" (Clary 168). At the same time, McCandless' insistent fabrication of his narrative recalls Treadwell's inexpertly mimetic grizzly footage. Herzog praises Treadwell for capturing "glorious spontaneous moments" as a filmmaker—an appreciation for cinematic realism that is

ironically undermined by Herzog's own wry attention to the painstaking staging and multiple takes of Treadwell's attempts to pose himself as the subject of a nature documentary, a strange and rare creature to observe. Despite his praise, Herzog almost comically draws attention to how Treadwell obscures Huguenard's presence in his camp in order to maintain "his stylization as the lone guardian of the grizzlies." As he pushes Huguenard out of a candid shot, he mutters, "I'm supposed to be alone." Herzog's attention to Treadwell's inept maintenance of his solitary façade illuminates McCandless' own impulses to fabrication as he relies on a willful construction of boundaries between natural and civilizational spheres to imagine himself a pure, natural identity.

McCandless' bifurcation of wilderness from civilization furthermore leads him to generalize nature as a static landscape that denies the material realities of a variable biosphere. During a trip to the Gulf of California, he subsists on nothing more than five pounds of rice and the little marine life he is able to fish, "an experience that would later convince him he could survive on similarly meager rations in the Alaska bush" (Krakauer 36). McCandless' tendency to flatten the wild as a homogeneous landscape in order to integrate his sense of identity into it further illustrates his implication in a tradition cordoning nature from civilization. By contrast, Krakauer's focus on topographical landscapes demonstrates a nuanced understanding of regional variation and enables his recognition that McCandless' chosen environment "scarcely qualifies as wilderness by Alaska standards" (165). While McCandless isolates himself in the Denali landscape, and ultimately dies there, the patch of forest is closely triangulated by the George Parks Highway, Denali's National Park Service-patrolled tourist access road, and a handful of then-unoccupied cabins. McCandless necessarily fabricates his wilderness.

Despite Krakauer's foregrounding of McCandless' hypocrisies, however, what seems important even to the author is that McCandless nonetheless *perceives* a gulf between human and nonhuman spheres. Because of his insistence on integrating into Denali's ecology, McCandless assumes he meshes with natural processes. Moments of rupture in his continuity with the natural world, however, cause extreme ambivalence toward the ecosystem with which he desires to identify. McCandless' reaction to a dust storm that interrupts his adventure in the Gulf of California shatters his fantasy. In his journal he writes, "*he screams and beats canoe with oar. The oar breaks. Alex has one spare oar. He calms himself. If loses second oar is dead. . . . This incident led Alexander to decide to abandon canoe and return north*" (Krakauer 36). This passage reveals the constant interplay between control and loss of control in McCandless' journey, as well as the fact that throughout his journals McCandless positions himself as the audience for his own supposed self-dispersal. Assuming that his integration into the Gulf environment will work out in his favor, his attempted control of the waves to bring him through the Gulf is nonetheless disappointed when he is unsurprisingly powerless over weather conditions. After this incident, however, McCandless simply shifts his perspective and positions himself as comfortably coextensive with the environment by following a new path that cannot be thwarted by maritime storms.

McCandless, in pushing civilization to the margins of his perception in order to pretend he has left it behind, remains willfully ignorant of the ways his sense of "pure" ecological identity is continually interrupted by inevitable incursions of human technology. Krakauer describes the southern length of the Colorado River, for example, as a landscape more or less entirely manmade: "Emasculated by dams and diversion canals, the lower

Colorado burbles indolently from reservoir to reservoir through some of the hottest, starkest country on the continent. McCandless was stirred by the austerity of this landscape, by its saline beauty" (32). Krakauer's language, like Abbey's, is gendered, but he makes use of a reverse but equally prolific metaphor—that of civilization as a *feminizing* influence, rather than the masculine bastion of culture. By contrast, the stark desert around the river would appear to be properly masculine, wild, and free. Despite McCandless' disavowal of the manmade, this line indicates that the canals nonetheless evoke a sense of wonder akin to that which he feels in Alaska.

A similar appreciation underlies his decision, when he reaches his destination, to squat in an abandoned bus, something less wild, perhaps, than the forest itself, though indeed forgotten, overtaken by wildness. The Fairbanks bus, "rusting incongruously in the fireweed beside the Stampede Trail," just beyond Denali's border (10), is not as secluded as it appears, despite the trail's lack of clear demarcation. Krakauer describes frequent traffic, especially by hunters and trappers, but also by vacationers. Three different groups discover McCandless' body the same day. One of the greatest ironies of McCandless' persistent denial of how his freedom in the wilderness consistently brushes up against the manmade is the fact that he carves his declaration of that freedom—"*Two Years He Walks The Earth. . . . No Longer To Be Poisoned By The Civilization He Flees*" (163)—into the bus, rather than something more stereotypically "natural." One might say McCandless views the bus much as he views himself, as having departed the sphere of civilization.

Despite the region's traffic, his patch of wilderness is significant in that he believes it to be isolated, and that he conceptualizes it as an uninterrupted ecosystem in which he comfortably meshes and will indefinitely survive, unaided and with minimal use of tools.

Krakauer facilitates the reader's impression of this sort of perspective by opening several chapters with ecological meditations, such as one on the bear-paw poppy, which he uses to segue into details about McCandless' experience in a given region. But as with most of his assumptions, the Supertramp's belief in his instinctual ability to thrive in his ecosystem is betrayed by the details of his experience. He requires a field guide to identify edible plants; he cannot innately classify them. And rather ironically, after he mishandles the preservation of a moose he has killed for meat, he writes in his terse, one-page journal, penned on a leaf of his plant guide, "MUST REVAMP MY SOUL + REGAIN DELIBERATE CONSCIOUSNESS" (in Christopher McCandless 236). He loses the moose to the flies and maggots, but his turmoil seems rather misplaced. The meat is only wasted on him, not the ecosystem at large.

McCandless' desperation at this moment is similar to Treadwell's deep sadness in *Grizzly Man* when he comes across the corpse of an immature fox, slain by wolves. "I love you, and I don't understand," he whispers. Herzog points out that at this moment Treadwell "seemed to ignore the fact that in nature there are predators." Despite his apparent ignorance, Treadwell at least acknowledges the role of the flies, to whom he yells, "Don't do it when I'm around," brushing them away from the carcass's eyes. The flies are ubiquitous. In almost every shot of the region curated by the documentary, hundreds of flies swarm the camera lens and grass. In one scene, the film draws attention to a lone rib on the ground—all that remains of the bear that killed Treadwell and Huguenard. Treadwell's pilot, who points out the bone on a tour of the old campsite, also says of Treadwell, "He would have been happy if nobody had found him, nobody found any remains, nobody found his camp. He would have been perfectly content." This observation obscures Huguenard, who, unlike Treadwell, was terrified of the bears, strengthening

Treadwell's self-centered illusion of solitary heroism. But the pilot's words also provide a counterpoint to one of Herzog's claims as he editorializes Treadwell's fate: "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." Herzog is mistaken. Such overwhelming indifference—such death—is exactly kinship enough for Treadwell or McCandless, who would presume to identify with the entirety of a dynamic ecosystem in which matter is recycled.

Fatal Dissolutions

Near the end of *Desert Solitaire* (1968), Abbey recounts a manhunt in which he takes part, the climax of which occurs when he locates the missing person, already dead in the desert. He and his companions examine the body:

> Given this man's age, the inevitability and suitability of his death, and the essential nature of life on earth, there is in each of us the unspeakable conviction that we are all well rid of him. His departure makes room for the living. Away with the old, in with the new. He is gone—we remain, others come. The plow of mortality drives through the stubble . . . clearing the field for the next crop. A ruthless, brutal process—but clean and beautiful. A part of our nature rebels against this truth. . . . A second truth of equal weight contradicts the first . . . that human life . . . is significant and unique and supreme beyond all the limits of reason and nature. And this second truth we can deny only at the cost of denying our humanity. (242)

This passage foregrounds two perspectives. The first is that the man's death, according to Abbey, is "suitable." Suitable in two ways: first, in that he has died in the desert rather than in the city, a personal preference for Abbey; second, in that death itself might be described, blindly but ecologically, as "suitable" when the standard against which it is measured is the necessary recycling of matter from human meat to buzzard or earth for the continuation of life.

The second important point is that Abbey claims, not without some melancholy, that the cost of diving into that ruthless, brutal, clean, and beautiful process is that of "humanity"—what Chapter 2 clarifies as the loss of Abbey's cohesive sense of selfhood, and by extension his unique relationships with his environment and other people. Abbey finds himself at a sad crossroads, located right at the end of this sentence. He wistfully, and desperately, wants to embrace that process. And yet he also wants—and finds it impossible not to want—the solidity of his self, which enables him to enjoy that process from a small distance in the first place. Nonetheless, in 1982 he wrote that he hoped, "as I have always hoped, that my own last vision" will not be the artifices of a manmade hospital, but "the spectacle of distant canyon walls, the profile of a mesa against the sky, the gleam of a river far below. These are the things I want to take with me in my dying moments, if I too must die, and taking them with and within me, all the way, become a part of them" (146). Two of Treadwell's close friends express a similar sentiment at the end of *Grizzly Man*. As they scatter his ashes, they observe that Treadwell "finally figured a way out to live here forever." Abbey's imagination of expansion in death, as well as the words of Treadwell's companions, recalls the narrator's approach to mortality in *Surfacing*—the foreclosure of self-identity and the body's dissemination among other living things as matter decomposes.

The *Back to the Wild* photography collection assumes that McCandless shares this sensibility—that "Alex understands the circle of life" (21). The text of *Into the Wild* suggests that McCandless might even expect that final dissolution, a disintegration of selfhood that is also the ultimate integration into the ecosystem's network. Krakauer indicates that at the time of his death McCandless decides not to resume control and take his own life, to rewrite his dissolutive narrative as he does in the Gulf of California, but to

succumb more or less gracefully to whatever ultimately killed him. “He must have been very brave and very strong, at the end, not to do himself in,” observes his mother Billie (202). By dying “naturally,” by unidentified herbaceous poison rather than rifle, McCandless physically achieves ecological dispersal. His flesh is food.

Krakauer’s reflection on this morbid success is only sadly favorable. He suggests that an unwavering belief in and commitment to dissolution in a wilderness lionized as divorced from civilization, taken to its physical extreme, results in biological dissolution—death—and also, by extension, that such a conclusion is unfavorable to sustainable ecological consciousness. Krakauer places melancholy faith in ambivalence itself, between selfhood and ecology, a tension he believes indivisible from his eventual recognition that wilderness and civilization comprise not distinct spheres but an ideological binary. Young Krakauer’s faith in the kind of infallible wilderness self-expansion McCandless takes for granted is shaken only after a series of near-death experiences. On Devils Thumb, where “the unnamed peaks towering over the glacier were bigger and comelier and infinitely more menacing than they would have been were I in the company of another person” (138), the young Krakauer experiences a sense of wholeness he paradoxically believes is made possible only by an absence—that of civilization. This fantasy shatters when, like McCandless on the Gulf, he becomes frustrated with his lack of control over both natural forces and their interplay with manmade technologies. Starving on the mountain in the aftermath of a blizzard, he hears a plane fly overhead. “I was alone,” he writes. “As silence again settled over the glacier, I felt abandoned, vulnerable, lost. I realized that I was sobbing. Embarrassed, I halted the blubbering by screaming obscenities until I grew hoarse” (141). Krakauer’s recognition of the unavoidability of manmade influence on both

the material landscape and his idea of it as an untouched wilderness, as well as his inability to police the border between nature and civilization, heralds a sea change in his perception. Having narrowly escaped death by frostbite and hunger, he returns to the town below Devils Thumb and reflects on his motives: "Like McCandless, I was a raw youth who mistook passion for insight and acted according to an obscure, gap-ridden logic" (153).

"Insight," in the context of McCandless' perceived wilderness isolation, takes on the connotation of "instinct," especially insofar as McCandless believes himself—falsely, as his edible plant guide demonstrates—to possess the ability to automatically and suitably react to his environment. This same belief, phrased in terms of "intuition," plays a starring role in the deep ecological bloc of what Krakauer refers to as "recondite ecological theory." The convictions of the deep ecologist arise, David Rothenberg writes, not from empirical study, but from the "intuition" of "[i]mmediate, spontaneous experience" (1). Arne Naess, the godfather of deep ecology, writes,

> When one is absorbed in contemplation of a concrete, natural thing there is no vivid experience of a subject-object relation. Nor when absorbed in vivid action, whether in movement or not. There is no epistemological ego reaching out to see and understand a tree or an opponent in a fight, or a problem of decision. A tree as experienced spontaneously is always part of a totality . . . Sometimes an ego-relation, sometimes not. (66)

Of course, the mere act of Naess' writing demonstrates a certain relation of "I" to object, without a doubt an instance of an "epistemological ego reaching out to see and understand a tree." Like Bookchin's ecological anarchism (with which they nonetheless sparred frequently), deep ecology's founding writers champion spontaneity as a primary method by which to celebrate both unity and diversity. That deep ecology understands universality and diversity as coexistent within a single "self" is one of its foremost contradictory tensions.

In drawing attention to deep ecology, I mean to point out that McCandless' putatively ecological affiliations replicate a philosophical position common to a diverse body of ecological writing, including deep ecology, early ecofeminism, and organicism, which propose, as Val Plumwood writes, a certain "distortion of difference," which, as the obverse to mainstream environmental ethics' application of "individualism and rational egoism" to the nonhuman, proposes a vision of "incorporation" (173). The discussion of Freud above applies to both McCandless and the deep ecological position, which "imagin[es] a story wherein modern humans have strayed from their pristine and ecologically benign roots" and "privileg[es] a strategy of a return to what was deemed a premodern condition . . . in the name of authenticity and ecological necessity" (van Wyck 2, 8). McCandless and his forebears share a dual commitment to expansive selfhood and wilderness as the conceptual location for "self-realization." Devall and Sessions notably address their volume on deep ecology to "the reader seeking a more authentic existence and integrity of character" (ix). Their philosophy, they write

> can potentially satisfy our deepest yearnings: faith and trust in our most basic intuitions; courage to take direct action; joyous confidence to dance with the sensuous harmonies discovered through spontaneous, playful intercourse with the rhythms of our bodies, the rhythms of flowing water, changes in the weather and seasons, and the overall processes of life on Earth. (7)

The word "intuition" resurfaces in this passage; the authors' melodramatic appeal to the "joyous confidence to dance with the sensuous harmonies" of the earth reads like a mantra out of McCandless' own journal, echoing the photo caption in *Back to the Wild* that celebrates the Supertramp's survival in the Sea of Cortez as an "accomplishment [that] plays like a melodic harmony deep within drawing him ever closer to his next and perhaps ultimate adventure" (83).

Rothenberg defines self-realization as the individual's intimate recognition and experience of "the principles of interconnectedness in nature" (8). Rothenberg writes that during this occult process, which takes place in putatively pure wilderness spaces, "the individual self or ego is [not] dissolved in the larger Self" (9). Yet Devall and Sessions, mostly consistent with Rothenberg, write that self-realization "goes beyond the . . . isolated ego" and takes on the "'real work' of becoming a whole person . . . the realization of 'self-in-Self' where 'Self' stands for organic wholeness." This capital-S "Self" includes "not only me, an individual human, but all humans, whales, grizzly bears, whole rain forest ecosystems, mountains and rivers, the tiniest microbes in the soil, and so on" (66-7). Crucially, they refer to the ego as a "narrow" or "social" self, suggesting that the expanded self they praise is "whole," originary, and more natural than socially constructed identity. This rhetoric suggests that what deep ecology's dominant model attempts to accomplish is having a cake and eating it too, an attempted philosophic reconciliation of ego with inchoate matter spread across the ecosystem.

This position, much like McCandless, neglects to recognize what *Into the Wild* and *Surfacing* suggest is the required annihilation at the heart of such a project. The deep ecological Self, Plumwood writes, "is not the result of a critique of egoism; rather, it is an enlargement and an extension"—into a Supertramp persona, for example—that "incorporates or internalizes outside objects in nature, assimilating them to self" in a way that is "characteristic of domination and instrumentalization" (Plumwood 179, 175). Plumwood's political critique aside, *Into the Wild* suggests a more literally deadly risk to such logic. Krakauer's profound fascination with McCandless' death in Alaska reads as an interest in the elimination of ambivalence between self and ecology—between the ego and

its dispersal—in death. As he reports his reaction to the 1996 Everest catastrophe in *Into Thin Air* (1997), prior to that disaster he had never “seen death at close range”: “Mortality had remained a conveniently hypothetical concept, an idea to ponder in the abstract” (270-1). That abstraction is precisely what is at issue for McCandless as well as for Krakauer. It is because McCandless abstracts wilderness and civilization that he comes to believe he can escape harm and find gratification on the side of wilderness. And yet the identity he hopes to locate there, defined by the ecosystem, signifies little more than the impersonal first law of thermodynamics, the recycling of energy and the transmutation of brute matter. Naess describes this cyclical transmission as a “relational field” that encapsulates “the totality of our interrelated experience,” and in which “‘material things’ are conceived of as junctions . . . The same things appear differently to us, with dissimilar qualities at various times, but they are nonetheless the same things” (55). Another, more fanciful way of phrasing this understanding is to say that if one buried their deceased cat in their backyard, the wildflowers that now grow over its grave are the same as the cat. Any transmission of matter or energy renders all organisms more or less identical over time. To some extent this interpretation is true, if we take units of energy as the sole value defining matter. It would be easy to consider someone identical to their cat if we understood both the individual and their cat to be not a human and a cat, but two collections of protons, neutrons, and electrons that just happened to organize in different ways. But if that were the case, then we would not bother placing emphasis on the self as such, to the extent that Naess, Rothenberg, Devall, Sessions, and McCandless all do. As Plumwood notes, it is not quite clear how “obliterating any human/nature distinction and dissolving self boundaries is supposed to provide the basis for an environmental ethic. The analysis of humans as

metaphysically unified with the cosmic whole will be equally true whatever relation humans stand in with nature" (177). In other words, humans are already part of an ecosystem, and always will be. To take seriously a sense of dissolution of selfhood into that system so that the system itself becomes one's identity seems only to hasten the arrival of the mortal moment at which one does—physically and completely—become dispersed.

By contrast, on Devils Thumb the young Krakauer reconsiders the dissolutive logic at the heart of his wilderness philosophy. He initially assumes that a) Devils Thumb, as wilderness, exists independently of human influence, b) its separation from civilization renders it the realm of "natural" selfhood, of "real" belonging, and c) because of this last point, nothing in the wilderness could possibly upset his smooth integration into the environment of the mountain. Experience, of course, teaches differently, and rattles young Krakauer's belief that he might dissolve—comfortably and physically—into unity with the mountain landscape without dying. In hindsight, Krakauer sees the aftermath of his trek in a dismal, foreboding light that foreshadows McCandless' own death: "I was stirred by the dark mystery of mortality. I couldn't resist stealing up to the edge of doom and peering over the brink" (155-6). But "I wasn't suicidal," he writes, and neither, he thinks, was McCandless. Death itself seems to be a highly ambivalent subject for Krakauer. On the one hand, he approaches McCandless' fate with a great degree of reverence—even fascination—by the end of his narrative. On the other, in *Into Thin Air* Krakauer dedicates himself to a transparent representation of his own sheer and at times uncontrollable terror in the face of extinction.

What is it about McCandless' death that preempts what Krakauer later describes as rendering him "emotionally anesthetized yet hyperaware," at the beginning of "a

downward spiral into the nightmarish territory of the mad" (*Into Thin Air* 245)? While Krakauer consistently references McCandless' death as a "tragedy," he professes an admiration for him that seems incommensurate with the Himalayan "calamity" that was "so far beyond anything I'd ever imaged that my brain simply shorted out and went dark" (264) that occurred within months of *Into the Wild*'s publication. On the brink of death on Devils Thumb, Krakauer again deploys the same gendered rhetoric Abbey uses to express his ingress to dissolved selfhood:

> The hint of what was concealed in those shadows terrified me, but I caught sight of something in the glimpse, some forbidden and elemental riddle that was no less compelling than the sweet, hidden petals of a woman's sex. In my case—and, I believe, in the case of Chris McCandless—that was a very different thing from wanting to die. (156)

Krakauer's hesitation, as well as McCandless' journals, suggests a desire not for death but for living cohesion with the wild around him—two points that in the end might be relatively indistinguishable. McCandless' acceptance of death caused by natural forces outside his control reads as a choice to ecologically integrate in the only holistic way possible: as carrion, primed to circulate within the ecosystem after life. To commit suicide would be to deny this recognition, and that McCandless chooses not to indicates a more or less ecologically aware fulfillment of his quest.

Krakauer's interest in McCandless' death suggests that the writer is concerned more with considering the limits of success for such a project than with questions regarding whether McCandless was ill-prepared. He seems most interested, that is, in understanding McCandless' demise as somehow successful, which is to say that he congratulates McCandless for doing what he has not done: taking his dissolution at face-value. It is clear that McCandless takes for granted an ability to achieve this dissolution, to be alone and

alive in the wilderness yet as one with it. He also takes this illusive ability as a reason to shore up a moralistically grandiose sense of self. Devall and Sessions do point out that "cultivating" their idea of ecological consciousness "is a two-edged sword. . . . If we seek only personal redemption we could become solitary ecological saints among the masses of those we might classify as 'sinners'" (14). The ultra-ascetic Supertramp is without a doubt guilty of perpetuating such a designation.

For Krakauer, however, this goal is at best unrealistic. As he works throughout the text to question McCandless' perceptions, he also cultivates, through his own anecdotes, an understanding that one's ego does not comfortably mesh with the environment as a flawless, unified "Self," as deep ecologists have appeared to understand the ecosystem. *Into the Wild* is skeptical of this "recondite ecological theory's" enduring legacy of ecological identity, of the sort McCandless takes quite seriously. Krakauer places emphasis on both ideas—the self and the ecosystem—rather than one holistic self or one impersonal ecosystem. He is ambivalent about his fascination with McCandless' death precisely because of his experiences on Devils Thumb, where he recognizes his subordination to the ecosystem, but also realizes he wants to survive, as himself, as Krakauer. The importance of the experience lies in the recoherence of Krakauer's sense of selfhood. No matter how forcefully McCandless pushes against the idea, it is quite impossible for an individual to dismiss his or her ego, especially when that person seeks to represent his or her experiences. Krakauer's ecological consciousness is defined by his ambivalence—an appreciation for his inextricable place in the ecosystem, tempered by the conviction that to give in to notions of a holistic, natural identity would be to forfeit any possibility of life or action. This second aspect parrots Plumwood's point about deep ecology's political inefficacy. If one identifies

with the entire ecosystem, one loses any sense of relationship an environmentalist ethics would seek to mediate. One sacrifices community for indistinguishability. *Into the Wild* affirms that one cannot achieve the dismissal of selfhood implicit in Alexander Supertramp's "longing for an authentic past" (van Wyck 11). To believe that one can be completely free of ego in the wilderness, and that the natural world is defined by freedom from ego and civilization, is to sentence oneself to death.

CHAPTER 6

Coda: Against the Authentic Life

We come to see that the ecological subject is a fabrication, which, in and of itself, is not a dismissal—fabrications are simply as good as they turn out to be. The point is, that as a fabrication, and not (in the wishful vision of deep ecology), a natural kind or state, we have a certain responsibility to ask what is being fabricated, for whom, and from what.

Peter C. van Wyck, *Primitives in the Wilderness*

On the shores of the Teklanika River—the very same that hindered Christopher McCandless' escape from his patch of wilderness in backcountry Alaska—a small plaque reads, "To stay put is to exist; to travel is to live." The memorial commemorates the death of Claire Ackermann, who, in 2010, drowned in the river, dragged to the bottom by the same rope she tied herself to in an attempt to safely cross during the river's typically turbulent summer. The same rough waters that barred passage to McCandless late in the summer of 1992, and which he had been wise enough to avoid for fear of their unpredictability, also proved unmanageable for Ackermann and her boyfriend Etienne Gros, who survived. The couple's adventure—and more tragically, their dilemma—purposefully mirrors McCandless'. The two traveled the Stampede Trail specifically in homage to the Supertramp, dead eighteen years almost to the day.

So begins an article published in *Outside* magazine in late 2013 entitled "The Chris McCandless Obsession Problem," by Diana Saverin. Jon Krakauer's treatment of McCandless in *Into the Wild* (1996), as well as Sean Penn's 2007 film adaptation, "helped elevate the McCandless saga to the status of modern myth," Saverin writes, a questionable accomplishment suspect for its unintended side effect of "McCandless pilgrims, inspired by his story, who are determined to see the bus for themselves." In addition to tracing McCandless' footsteps along the Stampede Trail, these admirers, Saverin writes, "ponder

the impact that McCandless's antimaterialist ethic, free-spirited travels, and time in the Alaskan wild has had on how they perceive the world." Saverin relates an almost comical account of her time scouting the river for material, as dazed hikers seem to pop out of almost every bush on her path, lost, hungry, stranded, or worse, *all* in the process of following McCandless' lead. And yet the humor in no way diminishes the urgency in Saverin's prose. At best, many people have taken a life-threatening dip five hundred meters down a glacial river in attempted imitation of their hero. At worst, people have died.

McCandless' directive to authenticity has been singularly attractive to his latter-day flunkies.[49] McCandless lionizes a deep ecological perspective of wilderness "as a space devoid of culture, devoid of civilization . . . the realm of the real, the well-spring of life, and as mirror in which is reflected *authentic* experience of the world" (van Wyck 83). As the last chapter details in psychoanalytic terms, he favors what Peter C. van Wyck refers to as a "developmental model of history" that "posits humans and their modern trappings as somehow like the layers of an onion; peel back the layers upon layers of history, technology, culture, modernity, and on the inside, at the very center, there can be found the kernel of the real human: the ecological subject" (104). This "peeling back" of oppressive layers recalls the discourse in which Herbert Marcuse, Norman O. Brown, and other social theorists participated as early as the 1950s, and visualizes the logic driving the tension between ecology and authenticity dramatized in the wilderness that both this dissertation and its texts have interrogated.

[49] The Facebook group "Into The Wild changed my life" boasts 6,471 members, as of August 2016. The name seems to refer to Penn's film rather than Krakauer's book. Most of its active members seem oblivious to the book's existence, as well as its more nuanced—and critical—treatment of the Supertramp figure.

The Supertramp does seem to have become something of a deep ecological iconoclast. Those who follow him demonstrate an impulse to romanticize McCandless as a wilderness saint in a way that obscures the contradictions at the heart of Krakauer's narrative. Ironically, the resulting Stampede Trail traffic has produced a site that "[o]nce wild . . . now looks worn with use. Charred fire rings, bullet cartridges, and soda cans are scattered on the surrounding grass. Trash . . . is littered about" (Saverin). Pilgrims who profess to pursue McCandless do not appear to grasp the lengths to which he went to craft the illusion that wilderness exists apart from human technology and mass-produced foodstuffs. The clearing's signs of wear are symptomatic of the fact that McCandless' "magic bus" has become something of a tourist destination for the moderately wealthy, a commodity in its own right; Saverin describes at least one individual who "rented the movie *Into the Wild* never having heard of it. The next day he read the book. The day after that, he bought a ticket to Alaska to go see the bus. . . . He had no experience in the backcountry, but like many others, he decided it required more determination than expertise."

Despite deep ecology's own gradual dissolution into environmentalist history, its trademark alignment of wilderness with authenticity, perpetuating a tradition stretching back at least to the nineteenth century, helped to propel that very term, "authenticity," to the forefront of popular and casual representations of the natural world. Wilderness "authenticity" even increasingly coexists rather happily with commercial endeavors of the sort derided by the deep ecologists. Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) briefly lampoons this very affiliation. About halfway through the novel, an American named Bill Malmstrom approaches the narrator at her cabin with a development proposition, a plan for "'a kind of

retreat lodge, where the members could meditate and observe,' he puffed, 'the beauties of nature'" (94). The land, he says, "'has a definite . . . rural charm'" (95). The one-page scene is quickly overshadowed by the narrator's discovery of her father's body and memory of her abortion, but the moment merits attention. Malmstrom "had trimmed gray hair and an executive moustache like the shirt ads, the vodka ads; his clothes were woodsy, semi-worn, verging on the authentic" (94). The narrator's observation that his dress "verg[es] on the authentic," as well as the slightly snide tone in which Atwood casts the comment, catches the eye. What, exactly, does it mean, to "verge" on the authentic? And what is it, exactly, about this particular man's sartorial presentation that qualifies?

One might ask the same question of Brandon Burk, who in August 2016 shared a photograph to his Instagram account (@brandonburkphotography) featuring a young, full-bearded man clad in burnt orange flannel by Pendleton Woolen Mills and a designer backpack by Red Clouds Collective. Burk frames the man with a landscape of Albion Basin, south of Salt Lake City, Utah. Amid a flood of hashtags listed beneath the image, one finds advertisements for the young man's sported brands, #mypendleton and #rawdenim (as well as my personal favorite, #flannel), mixed with more picaresque slogans such as #keepitwild, #lifeofadventure, #mylifeoutdoors, and, most notably, #liveauthentic. The image pointedly juxtaposes an appeal to authenticity, characterized by a remote wilderness locale, with designer goods, in an effort to rhetorically associate these products with the putatively authentic landscape. As of December 2017, users have deployed the #liveauthentic handle to tag nearly 23 million posts. Over 60,000 more appeared to be misplaced by a variation or spelling error, such as #liveauthentically or #liveauthentice. The hashtag is the brainchild of Folk Lifestyle, a Kentucky-based magazine and online

store whose website boasts profiles of "makers," online-based artisans specializing in the sort of rugged aesthetic favored by the #liveauthentic tag, tours of American coffee shops, portfolios of national park landscape photography, and a series entitled "Authentic Lives." Appeals to rugged lifestyle and a wilderness aesthetic are mainstays of American advertising. This particular campaign is notable, however, for its explicit appeal to authenticity, and its tendency to align this term with wilderness imagery. In these rustically arranged scenes, we must assume, lies authentic humanity. And the authentically human is a young individual who buys clothing, rucksacks, and accessories as authentic as they are. The message is clear. In order to enjoy a legitimate relationship with the natural world, one must purchase these items.

More interesting still is the #liveauthentic tag's companion, #livenaked, which features a titillating cascade of bare backsides foregrounded by hot springs, fields of wheat, and, in at least two instances, horses. These images, which more convincingly attempt to inspire lifestyle than sales, rather comically foreground at least one contradiction at the heart of this campaign. They recall the narrator of *Surfacing*, whose authentic human is pure animal, shuffling naked about the bush for food and shelter, burning its clothes. It is hard to imagine such a figure placing value in artisanal coffee or a designer tarpaulin for her next foray into the woods. The #livenaked crowd ironically supplies a literal image to what McCandless' experience forcefully illustrates. The authentically ecological individual is a piece of meat. The chief contradiction among those who would claim to live the authentic life is that the individual who truly considers his or her identity totally continuous with the ecosystem, in the wilderness context reserved for that supposedly uninterrupted ecological vision, would be unlikely to broadcast how authentically

ecological they are to others—a rhetorical paradox I called the ascetic superhero's boast in the previous chapter. They would, as the narrator of *Surfacing* suggests, be either foraging for food, or else rotting on the forest floor, as food themselves. The ease of this hashtag's use obscures the complex discursive history of the relationship among authenticity, ecology, and wilderness, and the implications of a rhetorical alignment of authenticity with either wilderness or ecology.

These examples show that at least one contemporary business model seems to replicate the deep ecological alliance between authenticity and wilderness, while at the same time holding revenue as its modus operandi—deep ecology turned to the ends of capitalism. Chapter 4's reading of *Surfacing* points to an illustrative analogue for this sort of transformation. Atwood's novel provides an extreme dramatization of a woman who seizes both the means and definition of reproduction; but, as Michelle Murphy points out, tangible, technoscientific, and "feminist health practices of the late twentieth century often shared with emerging neoliberal practices an ethic of fashioning inexpensive and individualized interventions into health problems," over time obscuring the individual women central to those concerns (3). Similarly, the notion that wilderness provides the venue for natural human ontology has informed a DIY attitude regarding both business and, to a lesser extent, environmentalism, with the latter a casualty to the former. This trend would appear to represent a somewhat paradoxical commercialization of disappearance that shuffles environmentalism into not only the realm of lifestyle choice—the subject of a longstanding criticism of mainstream environmentalism—but also the wilderness itself, where it remains hidden. Thousands of photo feeds romanticize this disappearance by reproducing the ascetic boast. He or she who lives the authentic life broadcasts a modest

brag, “I am further away from civilization than you,” a flourish that bolsters, while papering over, the more materialistic (and ironically other-directed, to borrow David Riesman’s term) announcement that “I have better stuff than you.”

This representation turns on a remarkably contradictory conception of selfhood. On the one hand, these images appeal to an authentic wilderness as a natural and real condition of human experience, as opposed to the assumedly inauthentic realm of culture. But at the same time, that authentic condition would appear to chiefly reside not in the wilderness context, but in the accessories with which these individuals decorate their bodies and that landscape—items that are, of course, produced by and within the very culture that first appeal would seem to disavow. These images represent individuals who define identity simultaneously, if ignorantly, by essential implication in the natural world and by its construction based on the performance of rustic tropes aided by certain consumer products. This second, performative notion of selfhood recalls the consumerist inauthenticity so vehemently rejected by the New Left; at the same time, the #liveauthentic emphasis on artisanship reflects the ecological consumerism advocated by some early environmentalist publications like the *Whole Earth Catalog*. These examples undermine the integrity and reliability of appeals to authenticity altogether.

It is worth noting that the #liveauthentic tag signals not only the tenacity of midcentury anxieties about selfhood, but also the ongoing prevalence of appeals to authenticity in environmentalist—or at least nominally environmentalist—discourse. To varying degrees, McCandless, deep ecologists, select ecofeminists, and the #liveauthentic crowd attempt to solve the titular tension between ecology and authenticity by equating natural identity with what they consider the authenticity of the wilderness or ecosystem

writ large, a project that ultimately aims at "the total reduction of the human to the biological" (van Wyck 76). This "ultimate melding of ideology and essentialism," as van Wyck terms it,

> flattens out the other relations of social hierarchy, domination, and oppression—from women to 'minorities'—that are overwritten through organicist projections . . . The contested categories, women, native, minority, the poor, nonwhite, Third World are no longer sites of discursive and political negotiation; the legitimation of difference is threatened directly through what amounts to the imposition of a totalized piece of bio-ideo-colonialism. (76)

Feminists scholars such as Val Plumwood and Donna Haraway have long sought to challenge "the analytic resources developed by progressives" that have "recalled us to an imagined organic body to integrate our resistance" (Haraway 1972).[50] Several of *Wild Abandon*'s primary texts—most notably *Surfacing* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977)—appear to agree that there is nothing particularly essential about identity positions, and that appeals to authenticity mask the social construction of both these positions and the pristine wilderness.

All of the dissertation's readings, however, do suggest that there *is* something essential about the material conditions of ecological interconnectivity. At the same time, not one of them seems satisfied with grounding a sense of authentic selfhood in biology or locating it in the ecosystem. Chapter 2 details how both Edward Abbey and Peter Matthiessen come to understand that such a resolution would destroy any recourse to a coherent sense of selfhood either man possesses. Chapter 3 outlines how Milkman's experience with a universalizing wilderness robs him of a sense of individual personhood

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[50] Haraway directs her critique toward not only deep ecology and psychoanalytically-charged social theory of the sort discussed in Chapter 1, but also cultural feminisms: "With the hard-won recognition of their social and historical constitution, gender, race, and class cannot provide the basis for belief in 'essential' unity" (1972).

at least as much as Guitar's brand of racial essentialism. The narrator of *Surfacing*, Chapter 4 notes, comes to understand that solution as the harbinger of death in an indifferent ecosystem. Krakauer, Chapter 5 argues, questions the very nature/culture dualism that makes possible the conception of an ecologically authentic self "undifferentiated from its context" (van Wyck 106). In other words, if these texts recognize something essential about ecology, they do not take that universal material condition as identity's defining limit, and even write against the impulse, shared by McCandless and the deep ecologists, to take indistinctness and interconnection *as* identity. Identity—authentic or inauthentic, depending on the text's position—is irreducible to the material conditions of ecology.

Each of these readings demonstrates that the chief trouble within the tension between ecology and selfhood lies in the notion of authenticity itself. Haraway addresses this issue in "A Cyborg Manifesto," in which she presents the cyborg figure as a way to conceptualize the human as it "skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense" (1969). While neither this dissertation nor its focal texts engage outright the technoscience that inspires Haraway, they do similarly distrust the presumption of an originary, reputedly pre-cultural "unity" as the locus of authentic selfhood, even as they tend to recognize biology as the most essential of human conditions. Furthermore, they suggest that to place claims to identity in the hands of ecology is to foreclose any possibility of individual action—or even survival—altogether.

In other words, these texts foreground the tension between ecology and selfhood as an uncomfortable yet *positive* situation, one necessary for both the recognition of a common biological condition and the maintenance of selfhood required to initiate, comprehend, and act on that very recognition. The imaginative act of dissolution appears,

in these texts, to be an enabling fiction, what van Wyck refers to in the epigraph above as a "fabrication, which in and of itself, is not a dismissal" (105). As this dissertation's texts make clear, dissolution is not an impersonal experience—it requires an "I" to imagine its own destruction. Dissolution represents not "a natural kind or state" (van Wyck 105), as McCandless so fatally believes, but the apprehension of a certain definition of selfhood "as tension, division, conflict" (Lasch 258). Moreover, to define oneself *as* the system, beyond obscuring the subjective momentum behind that act, is to suggest that one no longer has any individual stake in, or platform from which to address, changes to that system—the very point of environmentalist politics.

Environmentalism is hardly as singular a concern as such holism would have one believe. The environmental justice movement especially reveals how "risk is not equally distributed" across experiences of environmental disruption or catastrophe (Schlosberg11). No two people or groups experience environmental harm the same way, and all too often harm falls hardest on racial and ethnic minority populations. David Schlosberg suggests that the environmental justice movement's success is due primarily to its operation as neither a liberal interest group nor as a politics of identity (183). It instead comprises what he calls "unity without uniformity" (92), and pursues a critical pluralism based on "agonistic respect" and Habermasian "intersubjective communication . . . a key recognition of the other as a like, but separate, being" (76). Despite differences in context and perspective, effective environmentalist politics requires an effort at what Haraway refers to as "affinity, not identity" (1972), a cause common to civic participants that ties together a multitude of experiential grievances.

We might productively consider the tension between selfhood and ecology that these texts foreground, then, as the very basis for environmental action. That tension draws attention to and generates an awareness and comprehension of a shared ecological condition that nonetheless does not undermine the standpoints necessary to act politically. The question is not how to return to some more natural state of affairs, but how to pragmatically regulate activity in such a way that sustains human life, as well as the lives of other creatures. The relationship between different conceptions of identity and the efficacy of contemporary approaches to environmentalist political action falls outside the scope of this dissertation, but the historical insights contained herein might provide the basis for further study regarding how distinctive understandings of selfhood and belonging impact the coalition politics undertaken by environmental justice and related efforts. If the period primarily studied by this dissertation, during and in the immediate aftermath of the heyday of the New Left and counterculture, has long since passed, the legacy of this moment's introduction of authenticity and ecology as two sometimes radical and often competing discourses nonetheless continues to be felt today. The critical work undertaken by the writers examined in the previous chapters treads what Plumwood refers to as "a narrow way between . . . both difference and continuity" (*Feminism* 3). These texts gesture toward a shared foundation for ecological consciousness but foreground the variances of lived experience that provide the vessel for meaningful relationships, artistic production, and political action. Even if an ecological politics, and the people who would practice it, cannot survive by recourse to claims to authenticity, such claims have nonetheless directed attention to the uncomfortable, unsatisfactory, and important tension between ecology and selfhood that makes such a politics possible.

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