

THE PROJECT OF ECOPSYCHOLOGY

The Terrain of Ecopsychology

Human sanity requires some less-than-obvious connections to nature as well as the necessities of food, water, energy, and air. We have hardly begun to discover what those connections may be. . . .

—Paul Shepard,¹ 1969

Around the time that Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was igniting the modern environmental movement, the psychoanalyst Harold F. Searles published a book that received a much quieter reception, a thick volume entitled *The Nonhuman Environment: In Normal Development and in Schizophrenia*. His guiding idea was that, whether we are aware of it or not, the “nonhuman environment”—the trees, clouds, raccoons, rivers, skyscrapers, and manifold other nonhuman phenomena that weave together as the larger matrix for the affairs of humans—has great significance for human psychological life, a significance we ignore at peril to our own psychological well-being. In introducing his subject matter, Searles paused to comment that it “may be likened to a vast continent, as yet largely unexplored and uncharted.”² Sensing this large territory before him, he wrote: “During the past approximately sixty years, the focus of psychiatry’s attention has gradually become enlarged, from an early preoccupation with intrapsychic [interior] processes . . . to include interpersonal and broad sociological-anthropological factors. It would seem then that a natural next phase would consist in our broadening our focus still further, to include man’s [*sic*]³ relationship with his nonhuman environment.”⁴ Four decades later, this next phase in the broadening of psychology’s⁵ focus—call it “ecopsychology”—is finally beginning to take shape.

In offering definitions of ecopsychology, most of the people presently developing this field do indeed say something along the lines of Searles. They talk about synthesizing ecology and psychology, placing human psychology in an ecological context, and mending the divisions between mind and nature, humans and earth.

Many have simply adopted the position that, as human ecologist Paul Shepard put it in 1973: “If [the] environmental crisis signifies a crippled state of consciousness as much as it does damaged habitat, then that is perhaps where we should begin.”⁶ In the words of one of its most visible representatives, cultural historian Theodore Roszak, ecopsychology does not want to “stop at the city limits,” as if “the soul might be saved while the biosphere crumbles,”⁷ but rather illuminate the innate emotional bonds between “person and planet.” Such characterizations are appropriately in harmony with the root meanings of “ecopsychology.” Psychology is the *logos*—the study, order, meaning, or speech—of the *psyche* or soul. “*Eco*” derives from the Greek *oikos* which means “home.” Ecopsychology, then, would approach the psyche in relation to its earthly or natural home, its native abode, and explore “the basic shifts in our patterns of identity and relationship that occur when we include our connection to the web of life around us as essential to human well-being.”⁸

Ecologists study nature, while psychologists study human nature. Assuming these natures overlap, psychology already has obvious potential links to ecology. Indeed, before ecopsychology even became a word a small number of psychologists and ecologists were already crossing the boundaries. Any thorough reading of the works of depth psychologist Carl Jung, for example, will demonstrate that ecopsychologists are by no means starting from scratch. Among many other noteworthy remarks, Jung wrote that as:

scientific understanding has grown, so our world has become dehumanized. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos, because he is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional “unconscious identity” with natural phenomena. These have slowly lost their symbolic implications. . . . No voices now speak to man from stones, plants, and animals, nor does he speak to them believing they can hear. His contact with nature has gone, and with it has gone the profound emotional energy that this symbolic connection supplied.⁹

To be sure, among their various sources ecopsychologists have drawn heavily on Jungian or archetypal thought, the clearest example of which is Roszak’s positing of an “ecological unconscious.”¹⁰ Noting that in Jung’s hands the so-called collective unconscious¹¹ took on an increasingly “incorporeal and strictly cultural” flavor, removed from more bodily and earthly contents, Roszak proposes that the “collective unconscious, at its deepest level, shelters the compacted ecological intelligence of our species.”¹² Although the notion of the ecological unconscious remains undeveloped by Roszak, he writes that we are repressing this “ecological level of the unconscious,” leaving unawakened our “inherent sense of environmental reciprocity”—and suffering the ecological crisis as a consequence.

From the reverse starting point of ecology, we may recall Aldo Leopold’s remark (from his 1949 classic *A Sand County Almanac*) that the basic concept

of ecology is that “land is a community,” of which humans ought to be regarded as “plain members.”¹³ “We abuse land,” he said, “because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.” In this vein, ecopsychologists argue that if we accept the ecological view that we are members of the biotic community, rather than its mere exploiters, then we may learn to recognize the natural world as a social and psychological field, just as we do the human community. In his work on cybernetics, for instance, especially from the late 1960s onward, Gregory Bateson (a protoecopsychologist) sought to explain how our personal minds are part of a larger “eco-mental system” or Mind. The titles of his two best-known books, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* and *Mind and Nature*, suggest the territory he was walking. Although his work (and cybernetics in general) has been criticized for its ironically disembodied and purely formal portrayal of human consciousness,¹⁴ his claim that polluting Lake Erie is to drive it insane is certainly one way to identify a suffering in the soul of the natural world. Leopold spoke, in this respect, of his living “alone in a world of wounds.” Ecologists, he suggested, are trained to see the “marks of death in community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise.”¹⁵

I have intended these introductory remarks and brief background samples to provide the reader with an initial sense for what comprises the terrain of ecopsychology. It remains to acknowledge, however, that ecopsychology is a product of the modern or Western mind. Those indigenous or aboriginal peoples whose lifeways are still dedicated to the maintenance of reciprocal relations with the natural world are, by contrast, said to have no need for an ecopsychology. In fact, the direct engagement of many indigenous peoples with plants and animals, earth and sky, make the confinement of modern psychology to a strictly human bubble seem odd in the extreme. One of the few contributors to the ecopsychology literature of Native American heritage, Leslie Gray, thus claims that we “have only to look at the cross-cultural practices of perennial shamanism to find effective models of applied ecopsychology.”¹⁶ The archetypal psychologist James Hillman similarly contends that we must reimagine what it means to “make soul” by, among other things, getting “out of Western history to tribal animistic psychologies that are always mainly concerned, not with individualities, but with the soul of things . . . and propitiatory acts that keep the world on its course.”¹⁷ As still others have remarked, however, ecopsychologists must guard against becoming part of the historical process of colonizing and appropriating indigenous cultures that today includes the plundering of traditional spiritualities by Euroamerican seekers or new age “wannabes.”¹⁸ They must also be careful not to blindly assume that all aspects of all indigenous societies are unquestionably good. Given their obvious relevance, it is inevitable that ecopsychologists be familiar with some indigenous beliefs and practices—and this may remain a source of tension for some time. I believe, however, that most nonindigenous ecopsychologists are committed to

keeping themselves based primarily in the contexts of their own traditions, with which they are most familiar.

Getting a Handle on the Project: Four Tasks

Broad definitions of ecopsychology, such as I have just introduced, are easy enough to come by. Many people are still left wondering, however, just what ecopsychology is or what exactly an ecopsychologist does. I think there are two main reasons for this. First of all, the combining of psychology and ecology opens up such a vast terrain that it can seem limitless at times. Psychotherapy with “nature,” contemplative practice, wilderness practice, vision quests, earth poetics, ecological restoration, ecological design, building sustainable communities, shamanic counseling, Jungian dream analysis, deep ecology, environmental education: all have been associated with ecopsychology. How can a field that includes so much be considered a field at all? The second reason why ecopsychology is hard to define is because there is actually not a lot of strictly ecopsychological work that one can define it by. The literature of ecopsychology is still small, and much of it consists of explorations directed “toward” an ecopsychology rather than attempts to actually build one. The challenge I want to take up in this section, then, is that of getting a handle on a field that seems to have so much possibility yet so little actuality.

I suggest, to begin, that ecopsychology is best thought of as a *project*, in the sense of a large, multifaceted undertaking. This makes room for a great number of perspectives and interests and rules out the idea that ecopsychology will ever resemble a traditional discipline. I suggest, next, that ecopsychology be considered a *historical* undertaking—which is to say that it has arisen in response to specific historical conditions. More exactly, I believe there are four general tasks that ecopsychologists are in fact engaged in, each of which aims at resolving a corresponding historical need. I call these the psychological task, the philosophical task, the practical task, and the critical task. These tasks identify the common burdens that befall ecopsychologists, regardless of our particular orientations or vocabularies, for they derive from a historical moment we all share. Nature and history demand that we undertake these tasks. Hence, our work as ecopsychologists is to feel this demand in our bodies and to be true or faithful to it in our own particular ways. When the examples of ecopsychological work that do exist are organized into these four tasks, the overall project comes into view. Thus, I propose that it is these four tasks—or, more precisely, the interrelations among them—that define ecopsychology. In other words, the four tasks weave together to form the whole endeavor that I am calling the project of ecopsychology.

In what follows I walk through the four tasks in turn, describing the historical situations from which they arise and offering brief examples of ecopsychological works that are addressed to each of them. The section concludes with

a discussion of some of the interrelations among the four tasks, so that my definition of ecopsychology as an intricately woven general project can be further elaborated. I wish to say, finally, that my goal with this exercise is not to nail down ecopsychology for good, so that it can never move again. Certainly, there are other formulations of the tasks and other examples that could be given. My goal, rather, is to provide a scheme that can bring into better focus what we are doing as ecopsychologists, or at least provide a basis for some good discussion, while nonetheless leaving lots of room to maneuver.

The Psychological Task: To Acknowledge and Better Understand the Human-Nature Relationship as a Relationship

It may seem absurd to those unfamiliar with psychoanalytic thought to suppose that man treats Nature in terms of dominance and submission as he might treat another human being with whom he has not been able to establish a one-to-one relationship, but I believe these attitudes can not only be demonstrated, but are actually important for our understanding of what has gone wrong in our relationship with the natural world

—Anthony Storr,¹⁹ 1974

Ecopsychology is a psychological undertaking that essentially says “we too are nature.” Its first task is therefore to describe the human psyche in a way that makes it *internal* to the natural world or that makes it a phenomenon of nature. Stated otherwise, the task is to build a psychology that expands the field of significant relationships to include other-than-human beings; a psychology that views all psychological and spiritual matters in the light of our participation within the larger natural order. Ecopsychology is still concerned with our suffering and happiness, our dreaming, our search for meaning, our responsibilities to others, our states of consciousness, and so on; it just frames these concerns within the fuller, more-than-human scope of human existence.

The historical situation from which this task arises is obvious enough. Modern society is in an extreme, pathological state of rupture from the reality of the natural world, as is indicated on a daily basis by the ecological crisis. There is, moreover, little public recognition that this crisis is indeed a psychological one. This lack of recognition extends most crucially to the arena of psychology itself, as has been discussed by David Kidner in his recent exploration of why psychology is so conspicuously mute about the ecological crisis. Kidner notes that most psychologists are unwilling to regard our ecological troubles as evidence of “pathology in the relationship between humanity and the natural world.” Ecological problems are effectively “dichotomized into individual and environmental problems, and any possible relation between the two is repressed.” The result is that “environmental destruction is invisible to psychology.”²⁰ Searles likewise commented

on psychology's indifference toward the world of nature, stating in 1960 that in the writings of developmental psychologists "the nonhuman environment is . . . considered as irrelevant to human personality development, . . . as though the human race were alone in the universe, pursuing individual and collective destinies in a homogeneous matrix of nothingness."²¹ Perhaps one day it will seem strange that psychologists were ever so deaf and blind to the natural world—at which point ecopsychology will simply be psychology itself.

The initial challenge for ecopsychologists is thus to counter this deeply ingrained habit of ignoring the psychological significance of the human-nature relationship. This amounts, first of all, to *acknowledging* the human-nature relationship *as* a relationship. In other words, it means granting the natural world psychological status; regarding other-than-human beings as true interactants in life, as ensouled "others" in their own right, as fellow beings or kin. The requirement, in short, is to conceptualize the natural world in a way that is more satisfying for the purposes of psychological understanding than are the more usual representations of nature as a realm of mere scientific objects, resources, or scenic vistas. The demand here is also to find ways to talk about the human-nature relationship that do not set humans outside of nature, that is, that clarify how it is that we relate to "nature" while also being an embodied part of nature, involved in its processes ourselves.

As an example of one person's efforts to undertake this first task, perhaps no one has done more to reconceive other-than-human beings as psychological *counterplayers* (Erik Erikson's term) than the human ecologist Paul Shepard. Shepard claims that our psychological development inherently calls for a childhood immersion in wild nature and for a subsequent adolescent tutoring into mature, reciprocal, and harmonious relations with the larger natural world. Given this unconventional view, he then interprets our society's persistent degradation of its own habitat in terms of a widespread arrestment of this "normal" process of psychogenesis. General, "culturally-ratified distortions of childhood" and "mutilations of personal maturity," argues Shepard, are at the root of our "irrational and self-destructive attitudes toward the natural environment." He writes:

The archetypal role of nature—the mineral, plant, and animal world found most complete in wilderness—is in the development of the individual human personality, for it embodies the poetic expression of ways of being and relating to others. Urban civilization creates the illusion of a shortcut to individual maturity by attempting to omit the eight to ten years of immersion in nonhuman nature. Maturity so achieved is spurious because the individual, though he may be precociously articulate and sensitive to subtle human interplay, is without a grounding in the given structure that is nature. . . . Indeed, the real bitterness of modern social relations has its roots in that vacuum where a beautiful and awesome otherness should have been encountered.

Westerners, suggests Shepard, “may now be the possessors of the world’s flimsiest identity structure.” “The West is a vast testimonial to childhood botched to serve its own purposes, where history, masquerading as myth, authorizes men of action and men of thought to alter the world to match their regressive moods of omnipotence and insecurity.” In short, we are “childish adults” who keep our society going only at the private cost of “massive therapy, escapism, intoxicants, narcotics, fits of destructive rage, enormous grief, subordination to hierarchies, . . . and, perhaps worst of all, a readiness to strike back at a natural world we dimly perceive as having failed us.”²²

The Philosophical Task: To Place Psyche (Soul, Anima, Mind) Back into the (Natural) World

Psychology without ecology is lonely and vice versa. The salmon is not merely a projection, a symbol of some inner process, it is rather the embodiment of the soul that nourishes us all

—Tom Jay,²³

commenting on the view of Northwest Coast Indians, 1986

The thought of ecopsychology shakes us to our modern foundations. Most obviously, ecopsychologists reject the presumed dichotomies that underlie the modern enterprise, especially the human/nature and inner/outer splits. Indeed, the dualistic cleavage of our “inner” lives from an “outer” world may well be the core problem of ecopsychology, for it divorces mind from nature. As a project, ecopsychology therefore has no choice but to undertake philosophical efforts that will give it a more adequate intellectual home. This is a genre or concept-making task, as there are few existing theoretical frameworks that do not suffer from dualistic biases. To be sure, the split between humans and nature—as well as a near endless stream of related ones—runs through most of modern philosophy, science, and art.²⁴ Such a bifurcation of reality, however, is *historical*; it reflects a withdrawal of reality into the head of the modern Western individual and a corresponding estrangement of that individual from the “external” social and ecological world.²⁵ Modern psychology, like most things modern, has nonetheless taken this dichotomized reality as its starting point. “Having divided psychic reality from hard or external reality, psychology elaborates various theories to connect the two orders together, since the division is worrisome indeed. It means that psychic reality is conceived to be neither public, objective nor physical, while external reality, the sum of existing material objects and conditions, is conceived to be utterly devoid of soul. As the soul is without world, so the world is without soul.”²⁶ In other words, if mind is all “inside” and nature all “outside,” then psychology and ecology have nothing in common. The broad historical requirement of ecopsychology, then, is to “turn the psyche inside out,” locating mind in the world itself—healing our

dualism by returning soul to nature and nature to soul. In a statement definitive of ecopsychology's terrain as any, Jung once said: "Our psyche is part of nature, and its enigma is as limitless. Thus we cannot define either the psyche or nature."²⁷ The alchemical healer Sendivogius likewise said, "The greater part of the soul lies outside the body."²⁸ In more recent times, there are two main figures in ecopsychological circles who have explicitly argued such positions: the post-Jungian James Hillman and the ecophilosopher David Abram.

Hillman's strategy is to revive the Latin term *anima mundi* (anima = soul), which gets translated as the "soul of the world." The way to counter dualism is not to deny that there are inner and outer *poles* of reality.²⁹ That worldly things have their own inwardness is the very condition for their appearing as meaningful, having their own depth, mystery, and intentions; and for their being able to invite us into some kind of relation, to elicit our imagination. The soul of the world is this inner sense that runs horizontally through all things, showing itself as that implicit reality that shines forth from the world. "Each particular event, including individual humans with our invisible thoughts, feelings, and intentions, reveals a soul in its imaginative display."³⁰ Or as George Steiner wrote: "It is hidden Being that gives the rock its dense 'thereness,' that makes the heart pause when a kingfisher alights, that makes our own existence inseparable from that of others."³¹ An intangible inner presence lends the world the richness of its outer visibility, gives it personality, and unites all phenomena beneath the surface of reality. In this case, it makes more sense to say that "we are *in* the psyche" than that our psyches are in *us*.³² Hillman argues, however, that a kind of mass soul loss defines the modern epoch; and the world correspondingly robbed of soul has therefore taken on a relatively flat, disconnected, uninviting, depersonalized, and literal appearance for most of us. By pressing all of the soul into the human being, we have *deanimated* the world and simultaneously inflated the significance of the human person. Hence, "I must be desirable, attractive, a sex object, or win importance and power. For without these investments in my particular person, coming either from your subjectivity or my own, I too am but a dead thing among dead things, potentially forever lonely. . . . What stress, what effort it takes to live in a cemetery."³³ Because a dead, soulless world offers no intimacy, an enormous weight now rests on human relations, which have become "overcharged with archetypal significance": "our mothers fail, for they must always be Great, . . . having to supplant the dead depersonified world and be the seasons of the earth, the moon and the cows, the trees and the leaves on the trees. All this we expect from [human] persons."³⁴

While arriving at similar conclusions, David Abram makes his arguments from out of a different tradition, namely, the philosophical movement known as *phenomenology*.³⁵ Because the method of phenomenology is unfamiliar to most people, I will attempt a brief explication before turning to Abram's thought itself. (The "transcendental" phenomenology of Edmund Husserl is usually distinguished

from the “hermeneutic” phenomenology first articulated by Husserl’s student, Martin Heidegger. I refer primarily to the latter.) Phenomenology, most importantly, begins with *phenomena*, the reality given in lived experience prior to reflection. Eschewing statements that cannot somehow be related to our everyday experience of things, phenomenologists adopt as their method the *description* of the world as it is actually lived. In the words of the great French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, phenomenologists wish to re-achieve a “direct and primitive contact with the world.” They point out how poorly the various theoretical notions we habitually use to explain reality actually conform to our pretheoretical experiencing of it. The goal is therefore not to produce one more causal model to predict and control the world, but rather to find those words that are true to our experience—and so which, like good poetry, effect a shift in that experience, bringing us a new awareness or understanding of things.

Phenomenology’s experiential focus and “demand for awareness” make it a kind of therapy for healing the splits of modern thought. Many phenomenologists suggest that the delinking of inner self and outer world is an illusion, and describe instead how inside and outside intertwine as a single interactive structure they call “being-in-the-world.” One of the basic arguments of phenomenology is that no so-called inner experience can ever really be had. If we were to take the metaphor of “inside” literally and cut into our bodies, perhaps our brains, we would of course not find there any thoughts, images, emotions, percepts, or behavior, for all these things arise only in relation to or contact with a world. If I see something, this mug of tea before my eyes, I see it not as a representation on some mental screen in my head, but as that thing *in front of me*, out in the world, where I meet it or am with it. Similarly, my anger, although inwardly felt, is not something I can identify as an isolated content in an inner psychic container, for it is indivisible from the entire situation in which I am feeling angry. This is true even in my dreamworld, where I still live in relation to the sights and sounds around me. It was in this sense that Merleau-Ponty said that we live “out there among things,”³⁶ in a kind of communion with the world: “there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself.”³⁷ Through their descriptions of prereflective experience, then, phenomenologists disclose human existence as a network of *relations*; our being is not locked up inside us, but is in fact spread throughout this web of worldly interactions in which our existence continually unfolds. Or to turn to Merleau-Ponty one more time: the world is the “natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions.”³⁸

Abram’s project is to draw out the ecological implications of phenomenology’s quest for the primordial and its relational emphasis, especially as these are expressed in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. The “hidden thrust of the phenomenological movement,” says Abram, “is the reflective discovery of our inherence in the body of the Earth”—for “the ‘world’ to which [Merleau-Ponty] so often refers

is none other than the Earth.”³⁹ Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy was itself gradually revealing the earth as the original field for all human experience, the ultimate source of, or necessary ground for, all psychological life. He called perception a “mutual embrace” or conversation between body and world, such that the sensible world solicits our bodily responses and our bodies in turn interrogate the sensible.⁴⁰ Claiming, as did Merleau-Ponty, that we can have no experience, perception, or self-knowledge without a world in which to bodily interact, to touch and be touched by, Abram argues that the earth—the soil, wind, birds, insects—is the given world that our sensory life opens on to, anticipates, and is fed by. Turning to Abram’s evocative words themselves:

The human mind is not some otherworldly essence that comes to house itself inside our physiology. Rather it is instilled and provoked by the sensorial field itself, induced by the tensions and participations between the human body and the animate earth. The invisible shapes of smells, rhythms of cricketsong, and the movement of shadows all, in a sense, provide the subtle body of our thoughts. . . .

By acknowledging such links between the inner, psychological world and the perceptual terrain that surrounds us, we begin to turn inside-out, loosening the psyche from its confinement within a strictly human sphere, freeing sentience to return to the visible world that contains us. Intelligence is no longer ours alone but is a property of the earth; we are in it, of it, immersed in its depths. And indeed each terrain, each ecology, seems to have its own particular intelligence, its own unique vernacular of soil and leaf and sky.

Each place its own mind, its own psyche. Oak, madrone, Douglas fir, red-tailed hawk, serpentine in the sandstone, a certain scale to the topography, drenching rains in the winter, fog off-shore in the summer, salmon surging in the streams—all these together make up a particular state of mind, a place-specific intelligence shared by all the humans that dwell therein, but also by the coyotes yapping in those valleys, by the bobcats and the ferns and the spiders, by all beings who live and make their way in that zone. Each place its own psyche. Each sky its own blue.⁴¹

The Practical Task: To Develop Therapeutic and Recollective Practices Toward an Ecological Society

Of course I am in mourning for the land and water and my fellow beings. If this were not felt, I would be so defended and so in denial, so anesthetized, I would be insane. Yet this condition of mourning and grieving going on in my soul, this level of continuous sadness is a reflection of what is going on in the world and becomes internalized and called “depression,” a state altogether in me—my serotonin levels, my personal history, my problem. And

the drug industry . . . and insurance companies are in general agreement. You must become even more anesthetized. Take Prozac: Depression is a disease and weakens the economy.

—James Hillman,⁴² 1996

The practical sphere of ecopsychology is the most difficult to delimit. Almost any existing “psychological” activity (e.g., psychotherapy) can be placed in an ecological context, and almost any “ecological” activity (e.g., ecological restoration) can be approached in terms of its psychological effects or benefits.⁴³ As I mentioned above, this makes for a great deal of potential “ecopsychological” activity. Although people will no doubt draw their own lines around the *content* of ecopsychology practice, if we are to get a better handle on the project of ecopsychology we do at least need to specify what *characterizes* its practical dimension. As with the other three areas of ecopsychology, I believe the best way to do this is to ask ourselves what general task we are undertaking and what historical need we are thereby attempting to fill. To answer this question, furthermore, I suggest that it is helpful to regard ecopsychology as a psychologically based ecological politics. Viewed this way, the broad practical task is to develop psychologically informed practices or interventions aimed at creating a life-celebrating society. This task, in turn, has two overlapping aspects: practices that play a supportive or therapeutic role and practices that play a recollective role.

Therapeutic ecopsychological practices are those aimed at addressing the emotional and spiritual conditions underlying the ecological crisis. We live in a world where very little seems secure; where many people feel isolated, worn down, beleaguered, disempowered; and where the future can look even more unjust and hopeless. The ecopsychological task, in this respect, is to design practices that provide supportive or therapeutic contexts for people to find their footings in life and turn their attention to the real work of creating a life-centered society, whether this work be private actions or more public forms of political involvement. What makes such practice “ecopsychological” is its emphasis on the psychospiritual side of building an ecological society. For example, psychotherapy or spiritual training with ecological activists is in my view a form of ecopsychological practice, whereas the activism itself is not (unless undertaken precisely as such practice⁴⁴).

Recollective practices, on the other hand, are those activities that aim more directly at recalling how our human psyches are embedded in and nurtured by the larger psyche of nature and at relearning the essentially human art of revering, giving back to, and maintaining reciprocal relations with an animate natural world. Recollective practices, as the name suggests, invite us into zones of reality that may be quite unfamiliar, where a bird or a stone just might have something important to say to us. One such practice that is growing in popularity (at least in

the United States) is the “vision quest,” in which a solo quester typically spends a number of days fasting in the wilderness in order to seek guidance and spiritual renewal through openly encountering the forces of nature (a practice that, while being recollective, also has a therapeutic dimension).

What I propose, then, is that ecopsychological practice can presently be grouped into these two general areas, even if there may at times be considerable overlap between them; and that what characterizes the practice is both a psychological intention or emphasis and an alignment with the historical goal of building a society in which human and nonhuman nature can flourish together.

Although therapeutic and recollective practices are not mutually exclusive, I wish to offer some further examples below that relate primarily to the former. I have chosen this focus not because I think that the one area of practice is more important than the other (far from it), but simply because this seems the right place to talk about therapeutic practices and because the theme of recollection will appear throughout much of the second part of this book.

The work of the ecological, peace, and social justice activist Joanna Macy and her colleagues probably offers the most extensive answer to the need for therapeutic practices. Macy offers an illustrative story. “Once, when I told a psychotherapist of my outrage over the destruction of old-growth forests, she informed me that the bulldozers represented my libido and that my distress sprang from fear of my own sexuality.”⁴⁵ Macy’s experience, she says, is not untypical; therapists often interpret feelings of despair “as manifestations of some private neurosis.” In her own work, she has therefore made a point of validating, as healthy and real, what she calls our “pain for the world”: “the distress we feel in connection with the larger whole of which we are a part.” Refusing both dualism and individualism, she says that we suffer *for* old-growth forests and *for* other people in pain because we and these others are so interdependent. The immeasurable losses we are experiencing—including the loss of the biosphere as a viable habitat for countless life forms—comprise “the pivotal psychological reality of our time.” Our emotional responses are appropriately complex: fear, dread, or terror before the forces presently threatening life on earth; anger and rage at having to live under such threat; guilt for being “implicated in this catastrophe”; and, above all, sorrow—a “sadness beyond telling” that arises from confronting “so vast and final a loss as this.”⁴⁶

Macy says that she has yet to meet anyone “immune” from this pain for the world. Yet, precisely because this suffering is so collective and great we face an additional difficulty: the tendency to *deny* or *repress* this pain. The notion of “psychic numbing”—coined by psychologist Robert J. Lifton to describe the lack of feeling capacity among Hiroshima survivors—is often used to make sense of this denial. Immersed in an emotionally overwhelming reality, we anaesthetize ourselves and blot out or dissociate the unwanted truth. As therapist-activist Elissa Melamed wrote: “We may know intellectually that we are in desperate straights, but emotionally we are unconnected to this knowledge. An aura of unreality

hangs over the whole thing. . . . We are dealing with a vast psychological problem, a planetary clinical picture of flattened affect, if you will, yet psychology offers little in the way of assistance.”⁴⁷ Although it is understandable that we cut ourselves off from our painful feelings, people like Melamed and Macy point out that by doing so we deprive ourselves of the energy and direction our emotions might lend us toward taking creative political action. By staying numb, we stay stuck.

Against this emotional background, some ecopsychologists are now exploring how the ecology movement may in fact be “organizing, educating, and agitating with little regard for the fragile psychological complexities of the public whose hearts and minds it [seeks] to win.”⁴⁸ Roszak, for example, goes right to the point: “Environmentalists are among the most psychologically illiterate people you will ever meet. They work from a narrow range of motivations: the statistics of impending disaster, the coercive emotional force of fear and guilt. . . they overlook the unreason, the perversity, the sick desire that lie at the core of the psyche. Their strategy is shock and shame.”⁴⁹ In this light, many environmental groups may actually be *exploiting* our emotional condition—our fear, guilt, and so forth. Macy herself says that the grim information held up by activists “*by itself* can increase resistance, deepening the sense of apathy and powerlessness.”⁵⁰ Amongst its goals, ecopsychology thus “seeks to acquaint the environmental movement with a subtler, more sensitive psychological approach to the public it seeks to win over to its cause.”⁵¹ Educator Mitchell Thomashow similarly claims that environmentalists have a responsibility “to provide support for the anxiety that accompanies the perception of cultural upheaval and wounded ecosystems.” They must learn to facilitate the inner changes in the public that will help bring about the policy and behavioral changes they desire. “In this way, the environmental profession becomes a healing profession.”⁵²

Macy comments that “unless you have some roots in a spiritual practice that holds life sacred and encourages joyful communion with all your fellow beings, facing the enormous challenges ahead becomes nearly impossible.”⁵³ The role of psychological and spiritual practice in ecopsychology is currently being developed in a number of ways. Organizations such as the *Center for Psychology and Social Change* (with its Institute of Ecopsychology, Psychotherapy and Health) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the *Shavano Institute* in Boulder, Colorado, for instance, hold workshops where health professionals, activists, and others are introduced to ecopsychological theory and a range of psychological and spiritual practices to assist them in their work and lives. Macy and others have also responded to the need for healing on a more collective level by developing community workshops aimed at facilitating the so-called inner work of social change. One of the purposes of these workshops is to help participants overcome the oppressive taboos against expressing their pain for the world. As Sarah Conn notes, to become responsible for the current state of the world one must regain the ability to “feel and to engage rather than to become numbed and dulled.”⁵⁴

The workshops typically take place over a number of days, and proceed through three typical stages which spontaneously flow one into the other. The first stage involves using exercises to evoke the dreadful social and ecological realities of our times. People are supported to feel their pain for the world in a group setting and to cathartically express formerly blocked emotions. This expressive process sets the ground for the second stage, in which participants come to realize that just as there is pain in being interconnected with others, so too is there synergy and power. The “collective nature of our pain for the world is recognized as evidence of our interexistence, revealing the larger transpersonal matrix of our lives.”⁵⁵ The third and final stage is called “empowerment,” in which participants experience their personal power, broaden their vision of what is possible, and acquire skills for social change work. Because of the intense sharing of emotion and transpersonal sense of this work, it carries a distinctly spiritual charge.

The basic principles of despair and empowerment work have also been focused by Macy and others into another, more exclusively ecopsychological or deep ecological practice called “The Council of All Beings.”⁵⁶ This Council is a ritual meant to help people “think like a mountain” (as Aldo Leopold phrased it). Through exercises aimed both at freeing up painful emotions over our society’s destructive relation to the natural world and at deepening a sense of identity or connection with other-than-human beings, participants are supported to become more “ecologically conscious” and are allowed to “express their awareness of the ecological trouble we are in, and to deepen their motivation to act.”⁵⁷

The Critical Task: To Engage in Ecopsychologically Based Criticism

There is a blind spot in ecopsychology because the field is limited by its Eurocentric perspective, in the same way that the environmental movement as a whole has been blind to environmental racism. . . . I’ve been saying to my friends for a long time, “Why is it so easy for these people to think like mountains and not be able to think like people of color?”

—Carl Anthony,⁵⁸ 1995

When Searles proposed a broadening of psychology’s focus to include the human relation to the nonhuman environment he probably did not foresee how deeply such a move would cut. For when revealed *as* a relationship the human mistreatment of nature—the bulldozing, blasting, eliminating, slaughtering, polluting, and so on—comes glaringly into view. The rising exploitation of the natural world by our society has been justified only through a historical process of despiritualizing and depersonifying other-than-human beings so as to rule out any sort of ethical or sensitive relations with them.⁵⁹ Ecopsychologists propose an undoing of this human-centered—or “anthropocentric”—reduction of the being of nature to raw, moldable, inferior stuff that exists as if only to be on-call for human use.⁶⁰

They would reconceive nature along less narcissistic lines, as a sacred realm of intrinsic worth and as a world full of vital “others” for the articulation of the human psyche. (This, to say the least, changes everything.) This challenging of anthropocentrism is an example of the critical work of ecopsychology: to engage in ecopsychologically based criticism. Such criticism is called for because the world ultimately envisioned by ecopsychology is simply not the world of today.

As I conceive it, the critical task consists (at least initially) of bringing together the sorts of social and cultural criticism found among the more radical voices within both ecological and psychological circles. I believe it is fair to say, however, that most of the criticism currently encountered within ecopsychology is of the “cultural” variety (such as the critique of anthropocentrism) rather than the “social.” Indeed, the more socially critical elements of the radical ecology movement have yet to really make an appearance in ecopsychology. Ecopsychologists have made little use, moreover, of the socially radical views found within the literature of *psychology*, many of which are critical of the “psy” practices (psychiatry, psychology, psychotherapy, etc.) themselves. Of the four tasks or historical demands I have identified, I therefore suggest that the demand for criticism has so far received the least satisfying response from ecopsychologists. Hence my emphasis in what follows is on the vital need for ecopsychologists to become more thoroughly engaged in social analysis. Because my treatment of this task will involve detailing the points I have just introduced, the discussion here will be lengthier than each of the previous three.

Roughly speaking, mainstream environmentalists aim for reforms “within the system,” while the radicals want to reconstruct or change the system itself. On the whole, radical ecologists argue that without challenging the cultural backgrounds (beliefs, values, attitudes) and social arrangements (institutions, material conditions) that have historically sanctioned ecological degradation, nothing much will change. Among radical ecologists themselves, however, there is much disagreement about the best way to go, as is indicated by the numerous different schools or movements to which they variously belong, and by the vigorous debates that often occur between them.⁶¹ Of these schools, it is “deep ecology” and “ecofeminism” that have had the greatest influence on ecopsychology, primarily the former. Indeed, some say that ecopsychology is simply an outgrowth or instance of deep ecology. The result of this situation, however, is that the tension between deep ecology and the rest of the radical ecology movement has effectively carried over into ecopsychology. Plainly put, ecopsychology is currently vulnerable to the same criticism that is often made against the deep ecology movement itself: that its social and political thought lacks depth. To understand this point, we first need to take a look at deep ecology itself.

As with ecopsychology, deep ecology defies easy definition. I would briefly characterize it, however, as a movement to bring our personal lives and our culture into alignment with an ecological view of reality. It is usually defined by a broad

eight-point platform written by philosophers Arne Naess and George Sessions, the main planks of which involve making an “eco-centric” commitment to the well being and flourishing of all “Life on earth,” to ensuring that a richness and diversity of life forms exist.⁶² What deep ecology is perhaps most well-known for, however, is the attention that its supporters have paid to the relationship between ecology and self-identity. If everything is connected to everything else, if everything internally relates,⁶³ then what am I? The Buddhist-poet Gary Snyder remarks: “If people can acknowledge their membership in the fabric of the whole, acknowledge that they are part of the habitat, part of the network, part of the web, and feel that the welfare of the web is their welfare, and their welfare is the welfare of the web—in other words, not be mindlessly but mindfully one with the whole—that is an extraordinary spiritual and political step right there, and it dumps the cartridges out of the weapons.”⁶⁴ Indeed, much of the deep ecology literature is about experiencing the interrelatedness of all things in wilderness settings—as when the nineteenth-century wilderness advocate John Muir sensed trees and mountains shining with a kind of psychic aura, everything being luminously present as an interdependent whole. The shift to such an “ecological” mode of consciousness, in which one’s sense of reality lines up with the ecological givens, is held out by many deep ecology supporters as a necessary step toward an “ecologically mature” society. The deep ecology scholar Warwick Fox has in fact argued that what distinguishes deep ecology is precisely this psychological dimension. Because ecological consciousness (or *Self realization*, as it is also called) involves transcending the more narrow, biographic, egoic, or personal sense of self, he suggests that deep ecology has much in common with transpersonal psychology, which takes spiritual (beyond-the-personal) experience as its subject matter. He even proposes replacing the term deep ecology with *transpersonal ecology*—the idea being that as one develops a sense of self that is both transpersonal and ecological, one will care for the earth without being morally persuaded to do so because one will identify with it as Self.⁶⁵ It is thus through a process of psychospiritual growth that one will become motivated to develop an ecocentric lifestyle and participate in actions such as the direct defence of threatened wilderness areas.

While having great appeal for its placing of humanity back within the web of earthly life, deep ecology has not escaped criticism from the other schools of radical ecology; its criticisms have themselves been criticized.⁶⁶ Deep ecology supporters generally view the ecological crisis as a crisis of “character and culture.”⁶⁷ Their criticisms therefore tend to be along characterological and cultural lines. They denounce our modern culture (worldview, paradigm) for its anti-ecological qualities—for its anthropocentrism, its disenchanting and mechanistic science, its fixation on progress, its technocratic ways, and so on. They also criticize our culture for the shape it lends to our modern character. The modern, Western self is individualistic, egoistic, consumeristic; in a word: ecologically immature. The critics of deep ecology point out, however, that our character and culture

themselves have a *social* context—a context that the deep ecology movement has to a large extent ignored. For example, while deep ecology supporters wish to support a revolution in worldviews (from Newtonian-Cartesian to holistic-ecological), they tend not to consider how our worldview is itself anchored in particular social structures and everyday relations within a racist, sexist, classist society. At times they therefore give the impression that worldviews change merely through revolutions in thought or through the introduction of a new science.⁶⁸ Such criticism will not of course apply to all of those who think of their work as being deeply ecological. It is worth taking note, however, when one of the defenders of deep ecology, Kirkpatrick Sale, defines it by the fact that it thinks primarily “in biotic rather than social terms.”⁶⁹ For it is precisely over this point that the other areas of radical ecology have taken deep ecology to task.

Much of the criticism of deep ecology has come from ecofeminism. Ecofeminists bring attention to the historical fact that under patriarchal rule the repressing and exploiting of women has gone hand-in-hand with the repressing and exploiting of the natural world. The domination of nature, say ecofeminists, cannot be satisfactorily understood unless viewed as a feminist issue, so close is the connection between the man-centered or “androcentric” exploitation of nature (regarded as feminine) and of women (regarded as natural).⁷⁰ Many ecofeminists suggest that as a movement deep ecology is insufficiently sensitive to the complex ways in which naturism (domination of nature), sexism, racism, and classism interlock, and to the strategically central role that gender analysis could play in dismantling all of them.⁷¹ In reference to Fox, for example, Ariel Salleh charges that the attraction to transpersonal psychology “hangs on the self-actualizing logic of middle-class individualism,” and betrays comfortable doses of “illusion and self-indulgence.”⁷² (The kind of psychology advanced by many ecofeminists, by contrast, is a version of the feminist “self-in-relation” model—one in which the self is defined by its concrete and caring relations to particular others, human and otherwise, and by an openness to a plurality of other voices.⁷³) It is exactly deep ecology’s preoccupation with psychological and metaphysical themes, and the relative weakness of its social analysis that concerns her. Although the ecofeminist literature is widely held to be an important source for the development of ecopsychology (ecofeminism anthologies appear on all the ecopsychology bibliographies), the more demanding political claims made by ecofeminists such as Salleh have simply not been taken up by ecopsychologists.⁷⁴

The relative lack of social radicalism in ecopsychology is also indicated by its near complete neglect, so far as I am aware, of the social ecology and ecosocialist literatures. Broadly stated, social ecology is an anarchist movement based on the notion that social conflict is of a piece with our ecological troubles, that is, that oppressive social relations and the domination of the natural world share a single hierarchical mind-set; while ecosocialism goes beyond the classical Marxist analysis to emphasize how the contradiction between expanding economic production

and finite ecological limits (i.e., between the forces/relations of production and the conditions of production) will also play a role in the transition toward a post-capitalist society.⁷⁵ The one notable person to contribute views to ecopsychology in this social area is the environmental justice activist Carl Anthony.⁷⁶ One of Anthony's main points is that the so-called ecological self has to date not been a "multicultural self," and that deep ecology's embrace of diversity and interdependence has not in practice extended to an embrace of *human* diversity and interdependence. "An ecopsychology that has no place for people of color, that doesn't set out to correct the distortions of racism," he says, "is an oxymoron." Deep ecology, he says, tends to construe the ecological crisis in terms of a "white" identity, neglecting the experiences and history of people of color, including the estrangement of blacks from the land under slavery. He also speaks of "the sense of loss suffered by many people living in the city, who are traumatized by the fact that they don't have a functional relationship to nature." Suggesting a possible area for ecopsychological investigation, he notes, finally, that the "environmental justice movement . . . needs a greater understanding of the psychological dimensions of environmental racism."⁷⁷

Whether any given ecopsychologist aligns him- or herself with environmental justice, ecofeminism, or some other socially critical brand of radical ecology is not my main concern. My intention in these paragraphs has simply been to identify (in an admittedly limited way) a general area of radicalism that is at present not well-enough occupied by ecopsychologists.

The other general area relatively unoccupied by ecopsychologists is that of socially radical *psychology*. Psychological knowledge, insofar as it exposes the unlovely shadow side of a society, is dangerous knowledge.⁷⁸ As psychology un.masks, it has the potential to threaten—a fact well known by those, such as feminist psychiatrist Judith Herman, who have fought to disclose the widespread occurrence, and devastating effects, of domestic abuse and political terror. As witnesses to the psychic injuries wrought by our society, psychotherapists are uniquely positioned to be social critics. Indeed, there is a sort of latent affinity between social radicals and psychotherapists in that they both have an interest in identifying our self-deceptions and mystifications, in piercing our illusions and making better contact with reality. From a psychological angle, I therefore believe that what Joel Kovel has said about psychoanalysis also needs to be said about ecopsychology: that it "*necessarily* has to adopt a deeply critical attitude toward society" and that it "cannot be itself unless it is linkable—at least in principle—to a radical political attitude."⁷⁹

The number of radical thinkers in psychology is relatively small, these including, in my reading, Herman, Kovel, David Ingleby, Russell Jacoby, Christopher Lasch, Peter Breggin, Philip Cushman, and Isaac Prilleltensky. What these radicals lack in numbers they nonetheless make up for in polemical bite. They accuse the psychological mainstream of being an instrument of

social conformity and depoliticization; of propping up an oppressive ideological status quo; of obscuring the sociocultural and political origins of psychological distress by adopting medical, natural scientific, individualistic, and male-centered models; and of repressing Freud's scandalous insights into the socially generated sickness, the "demonic terror," hidden in the depths of the modern mind behind the "facade of consciousness." Freud, some of them say, amply demonstrated that "individual neurosis is a response to brutal social conditions,"⁸⁰ that the Western tradition has a "seamy side,"⁸¹ and yet—to update Marx—"psychotherapy has in some respects been even more successful than religion in deflecting energy away from the need for radical social change."⁸² "Indeed, an opacity to the actual social basis of psy practice is one of the defining features of these professions."⁸³ Dreyer Kruger writes, finally, that "it is one of the ironies of contemporary psychology that it fails to demonstrate a concern with the problem of man, that it allows its views of reality to be dictated to it by technology and its concomitant social structures, that it has hardly any historical dimension, that it is oblivious to the problematic past and blind to the possible agonies of the future."⁸⁴

While a thorough examination of the "morals and politics of psychology" is beyond the scope of this book, I suggest that if ecopsychology is to be a radical project then it must seek out the critical currents within psychology itself, not just ecology. As I read it, the central message of critical psychology is that (1) the organization of society affects the organization of psyche; and (2) psychologists uncritically participate in, and so reinforce, many oppressive aspects of our society which themselves contribute to psychic suffering. My concern with the development of *ecopsychology* is correspondingly that it not (1) reductively cast social and ecological issues in purely psychological terms; and (2) itself maintain oppressive social relations.

Regarding my first concern, there is growing awareness within ecological politics (as I discussed above) that we are now facing a "social-ecological crisis;" that the earth will not be saved while issues of justice, power, and emancipation go ignored.⁸⁵ Translated into the domain of ecopsychology: if we are, in good faith, to understand the psychopathology in the human-nature relationship, we cannot avoid an examination of the social mediation *of* this relationship. If the psyche exists beyond the boundaries of the skin, then this makes it a social as well as an ecological phenomenon, and ties our alienation from nature to our alienation within human society. I repeatedly come back to Kovel's work in this book because (among other reasons) he has been carrying on a discourse that parallels ecopsychology's, but on a sociological plane. He turns psyche inside-out to land it not in a forest, but in an unjust, fragmenting society.⁸⁶ Kovel convincingly argues, then, that "the social" is a category with which psychologists—and I would add ecopsychologists—must reckon.⁸⁷

Ecopsychologists have approached the psyche-society connection in several ways. Some are simply quiet on the matter; as is Fox, for example, in his

elaboration of transpersonal ecology.⁸⁸ (To be clear: I take no issue with talking about the transpersonal self, but only insist that we discuss *at the same time* the violent social conditions that make a *depersonalized* self the more likely reality for most of us.) Among those who do speak directly to social issues, there is nonetheless a tendency to reduce these to the outward “manifestations” of our inner state of consciousness, rather than to consider how socioeconomic and political forces *themselves* contribute to that inner condition.⁸⁹ Finally, there are a small number of ecopsychologists who go so far as to examine the effect of social forces on our psychic lives, such as the role played by the advertising industry in fostering consumerism. Allen Kanner and Mary Gomes speak, for example, of the “outright abuse of psychological expertise” in the advertising field.⁹⁰ On the whole, however, there is still a minimum of critical social theory within ecopsychology. This is no small matter, for if our goal is ecological consciousness, and if our society produces a devitalized, narcissistic consciousness instead, then it is imperative that we give critical attention to the social order. Indeed, for ecopsychologists to overlook social analysis in favor of a more narrowly psychological approach is no less than to bypass one of the main factors in our ecopsychological situation.⁹¹ I cannot myself claim to have adequately achieved a socially radical ecopsychological stance (one that thoroughly incorporates, rather than bypasses, the social sphere), as the interdisciplinary demands and personal commitments necessary to get there are great. I do, however, hold this task out as a challenge to myself, and hold the same challenge out to the rest of the field.

Regarding my second concern, that ecopsychology not involve itself in oppressive social forms, I suggest that some conservative tendencies within ecopsychology act to undermine its own radical implications. Roszak, for instance, has put forward the idea that it “might generate a new, legally actionable, environmentally based criterion of mental health that could take on prodigious legal and policy-making implications.”⁹² Sarah Conn has similarly offered that the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual* (DSM) be revised to include such diagnoses as “materialistic disorder,” the need to consume.⁹³ My own wish, by contrast, is that ecopsychology stay well away from any numerically coded catalogues of “mental illnesses.” The danger is that the DSM is a highly contested document that has been criticized for both its metaphysical dubiousness and its use as a tool for oppressing and mystifying people by medicalizing them and labeling them deviant, thereby serving the dominant power-interests of our society.⁹⁴ Speaking of the sheer massiveness of the DSM, Kovel writes that the “age-old dream of science, that of total control by man over nature, embodied here in the endless proliferation of categories, lists and ‘decision trees,’ becomes thereby an instrument of domination.”⁹⁵ Roszak and Conn genuinely want to challenge psychology’s lack of consideration for our relationship to the earth, and Conn is herself a critic of the DSM.⁹⁶ My concern, though, is that proposals to institutionalize ecopsychology may