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Bad Environmentalism: Affective Dissent in the Ecological Age

My new book project will draw attention to “bad” expressions of environmentalism from the past three decades: those that are perverse, playful, ironic, irreverent, absurd, and even indecent, in defiance of mainstream environmentalism’s sincerity and sentimentality. My archive will consist of North American novels, film, TV, digital media, and performance art—from Don DeLillo’s postmodern classic *White Noise*, to MTV’s nature/stunt program *Wildboyz*, to the Lesbian National Parks and Services performance art project.

Bad Environmentalism will theorize the public functions that such texts serve. For instance, I argue that a “juvenile” text such as *Wildboyz* manages the charges of elitism so often lobbied at environmentalists, and develops in turn an accessible, egalitarian environmental ethic. I also claim the texts in my archive as crucial responses for our current moment: they allow us to navigate an absurd reality in which mounting evidence of advanced ecological crisis can occasion not direct action but “doomsday fatigue,” and in which passionate feelings about such crisis are either requisite or ridiculed, depending on the context. I therefore characterize “bad environmentalisms” as both activist heuristics and cultural diagnoses.

Through my readings, I seek to expand our understanding of what environmental literature does, and what it looks like. I also hope to challenge the idea that an age of ironic detachment is necessarily an apolitical one—and the received wisdom that, to perform effective political work, one has to be “taken seriously.” While offering new readings of the texts in my archive, this project will also contribute to recent work in emerging areas such as affect theory, ecomedia studies, and queer ecology, and to current discussions in established fields such as environmental ethics and political science.