

Uses of Environmental Humanities: Salma Monani

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Series, Uses of Environmental Humanities

The Uses of Environmental Humanities series explores diverse and creative ways of thinking with the Environmental Humanities in responding to socio-environmental challenges. Contributors address the influence of the Environmental Humanities and ways in which we might use this field of study, offering insights into the interactions between societies, science, politics, and culture. The series is curated by Samantha Rothbart.

“Four Ways of Seeing the Uses of Ecomedia Studies”^[1]

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Digital media permeates everyday life worldwide. All across the globe, from New York City to Nome, from Nanjing to Mankosi, people can pull out a smart phone, tap on its screen, and access not only written words and photographs but also films, video games, and a host of other interactive and mixed media. As someone who remembers a time before such everyday access, who is uncomfortably a “digital immigrant,”^[2] and spent my childhood without a computer (let alone a cell phone), I’m tempted to think about such media the way so many environmentalists have engaged technology for what seems like an eternity—with alarm at **“the end of nature”** and hand-wringing about **“nature deficit order.”** There is, of course, a tired hypocrisy to such declarations. Like so many others, I *use* digital media more than I don’t—not only for work but for play, sociality, and retreat. And, since I’m not alone in my use but rather one of over **2.1 billion people** who owns a smart phone, there’s got to be some *use* in thinking about digital media in more than terms of gloomy (and doomy) binaries of technology versus Nature. This is the project of ecomedia studies. The field explores both digital and analog media through ecocritical lenses, and encourages interrogation of the entanglements of nature and culture that mark our everyday use of media.^[3] Below I reflect on various uses of the field, bringing my own personal interest in the value of Indigenous media and its insights to the fore.

One Use of Ecomedia Studies: Seeing Environment in Diverse Ways On Screen

Does media help us see environmental connections? On this digital blog platform, the question is decidedly rhetorical because that is the aim of “**Seeing the Woods**,” as stated in its mission: to provide context that will help reveal the bigger picture, or “the woods,” explaining the long and complex relationship between humans and nature.

We’re all familiar with media that inform us about our ecological embeddedness. Even as I write this, the Intergovernmental planetary Climate Change Panel’s (IPCC) most recent warnings about climate change are circulating on digital platforms—on organization pages (such as that of the **UN**), on **news sites**, and on social media timelines. Such rapid and wide dispersion of important environmental messaging makes it difficult to condemn the technology as inherently ecologically harmful. Much ecomedia studies scholarship highlights the positive value of messaging.

However, such messages aren’t always heard, or seen—or if they are, they aren’t always effective. The Onion headline below from 2018 gets at this problematic aspect of environmental messaging.

A woman holding a smart phone to her ear is oblivious to the apparitions of scientists trying to get her attention. Simultaneously comedic and depressing, the near invisibility of these environmental dooms-dayers is not surprising.

Many ecomedia scholars explore how and why mainstream portrayals of environmentalists—as stereotypically alarmist, didactic, esoteric, and elitist (lab-coated scientists, in this case!)—dissolve concern into absurdist parody (of ineffectual phantoms hovering ridiculously on the sidelines of modern life). They also consider mainstream media’s often-persistent *lack* of environmental messaging.^[4] Ecomedia studies also looks to identify more effective forms of messaging. For example, Nicole Seymour’s *Bad Environmentalism* champions alternative messaging that rejects the “killjoy” tropes of environmentalism in favor of those that celebrate other affective modes for activist potential (see the second post in this series).

Indigenous two-spirited filmmaker **Thirza Cuthand’s** (Plains Cree/Scot) 13-minute short *Reclamation* is one such example of alternative messaging. Portraying a post-apocalyptic future 150 years in the future where “the colonizers have left Earth to colonize Mars and the Indigenous people are left behind to clean up the mess,” the mockumentary

is anything but alarmist. Sporting gas masks, its everyday heroes nonetheless ad-lib about cows (that are “dumber than buffalo”), trash left behind by the colonizers, gardening, and a daycare service they’ve created called the Baby Club (where anyone can pick up any baby for the day). Within this playful celebration of “how easy it is to decolonize without the colonizers around,” *Reclamation* contradicts the gloom and doom associated with elitist (White) environmentalism. It irreverently brings ecological issues into conversation with social (in)justices—of patriarchy, race, and heteronormativity—opening up spaces for seeing how environmentalism relates to other social issues without the trope of fatal gloominess.

A Second Use: Seeing Content and Material Flows

Reclamation’s images circulate in contexts of *flow*—traditionally understood in media studies as the way meaning connects across streams of media content. For example, the meaning of gas masks, never explicitly explained in *Reclamation*, flows between the short’s cheeky incorporation of the prop to the more dire imagery of traditional environmental rhetoric. (For more on gas mask in such rhetoric, see Finis Dunaway’s **Seeing Green**.) While the idea of content flow is not new to media studies, ecomedia studies helps us also to see *material flow*. From production to distribution, to consumption and post-consumption, material entities are entwined in the flow of media content. Land (in the form of natural resources affected by and incorporated into media technologies) and bodies (in the form of those laboring within media industries and on land used by it) are invariably entangled in the media content delivered to us.^[5]

Ecomedia scholars ask us to track material flow so that we might see its social and ecological consequences. Smart phones are tethered to mines and e-waste sites and are networked through underwater cables and satellite infrastructures.^[6] *Reclamation* uses its media content to draw attention to material flows—the “mess left behind.” Ecomedia scholars Mél Hogan and Andrea Zeffiro’s site “**Speculative Historiographies of Techno-trash**” dig deeper, inviting users to personally reflect on their own “use, disuse, and disposal” of media technologies. And, scholars like Jussi Parikka dig even deeper, unearthing a Geology of Media that “leads us to track the nonorganic in constructing media before they become media: the literal deep times and deep places of media in mines and rare earth mineral.”

Ecomedia scholars also help us see the afterlives of the materials that enable our media use. In *Reclamation*, media’s materiality continues to trace its presence on the land

and bodies of “those left behind.” The Rachel Carson Center’s collaborative research and creative **Anthropocene Project** includes discussions of technofossils—the fossilized remains of our technologies, as visualized in the geological record of the Earth’s future.

In making material flow visible, others like Sean Cubitt further challenge our very sense of what we recognize as media:

When we speak of media, we tend to refer to the technological media of the last two hundred years; but everything that mediates is a medium—light, molecules, energy...The flow of mediation precedes all separations, all distinctions, all thingliness, objects, and objectivity. It precedes the separation of the human and the environment. (**Finite Media**, 4).

As Cubitt suggests, mainstream, hegemonic modes of communication often direct us to render mediation as “parceled out” *things* (e.g., cell phones, computers etc.)—not as *processes* intrinsically and inevitably in connective flow (e.g., earthly materials in networked flux). Such parceling is ecologically and socially destructive, privileging individualistic capital and monetary gain over responsible relations to land and labor. Thus, ecomedia scholars also direct our gaze to forms of non-hegemonic mediation (like *Reclamation*) that try instead to reintegrate understandings of flow, in order to help us recognize our ethical relations to others. In other words, ecomedia studies draws attention to media that are resisting the current power structures that contribute to the eco-social crises of our times.

A Third Use: Seeing Power and Resistance

In a post-film screening conversation at the **imagineNATIVE Film & Media festival** in Toronto, Cuthand pointed out that *Reclamation* responds to recent news about Tesla CEO **Elon Musk’s SpaceX** plans to launch ships to colonize Mars. You can imagine who is going to be on those ships, and who is not, she commented, drawing our attention to the economic, material, and social structures that privilege a select few at the expense of many others. In shaping *Reclamation* as a cheeky rejoinder to neoliberalism’s selfishness, Cuthand engages in a mediated act of resistance that flows 150 years forward (where the film’s narrative is set) and more than 500 years backwards to when the colonizers first sought possession of North American lands. The film resists genocidal removal of Indigenous peoples from their ways of being and their relations to their lands, and in doing so contradicts hegemonic communicative systems that “vanish” Native peoples into a

remote past or incapacitate them as anachronistic victims of the present. “We are still here,” *Reclamation* proclaims, and, “heck, we aren’t letting your trashiness get us down.”

In doing so, *Reclamation* is an example of a rich and growing media archive by Indigenous peoples expressing alternatives to settler colonialism’s unending faith in money. The latter belief refuses to imagine the possibilities of worlds outside of capitalist consumption, and at its worst, it demonizes such possibilities as “acts of terror.”

In considering the environmental and cultural crisis that erupted at Standing Rock in North Dakota, scholar Emily Roehl demonstrates the distinctions in media use. In the hands of the capitalist state, drones engage in a panoptic surveillance that depersonalizes land to claim it as passive property. By contrast, the Indigenous drone media deeply personalize, bringing the faces, voices, and feelings of the encamped water protectors into interactive play with viewers on social media. While capitalist-state power refuses to grant subjective and ethical value to the “objects” it seeks to possess, Indigenous resistance showcases the on-the-ground meanings of belonging in ethical (and exploitative) relations with others.

As an ecomedia scholar, I invite you to connect the Indigenous use of drones at Standing Rock to science fiction such as *Reclamation*. The flows of time, peoples, and materialities between the present (and pasts) of Standing Rock and the future of *Reclamation* are spaces to speculate on the blurring lines between possibilities and impossibilities. Such juxtapositions encourage new ways of questioning what we think of as the good life—good how? And, good for whom? As the characters in *Reclamation* remind us, half tongue-in-cheek, who knows how those colonizers are doing on Mars anyway? (Did they even make it?)

Seeing Other Uses: Invitations to Rethink Academic Practices

Reworking how we see our own mediations of academic practices to contest established power structures helps us understand the relevance of our field to the worlds we both interrogate and inhabit. I conclude with two examples as invitations to see outside the norms of conventional academic practice.

First, the Association for Literature and Environment's **Ecomedia Symposium: A Clockwork Green** is one ecomedia community's self-reflexive means to control its own material footprint, to be "nearly carbon neutral." As the symposium's **White Paper** guidelines note, an academic institution's contribution to climate change comes primarily from its members traveling to in-person conferences, talks, and meetings. Meeting online actually does make a difference—at least in curbing carbon impacts.

Second, some ecomedia scholars (myself very much so!) are working against a systemic legacy of Whiteness in academics by branching towards media expressions beyond Europe and settler America, including in Indigenous America. However, despite the fact that much ecomedia scholarship is becoming more willing to study non-White texts, it often places these texts within the theoretical frames of White academia. Yet one might ask, why just use such White theoretical frames? How might non-White frames help us see differently and engage more fully with non-White texts?

Thus, for example, I analyze *Reclamation* as a film through frames of Indigenous intellectual thought. For example, I draw on Mishuana Goeman's (Tonawanda band of Seneca) concept of Indigenous "(re)mapping" in *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*. As she explains with attention to Indigenous literature, "(re)mapping" is about "remembering important connections to land and community." At the same time, the parentheses in "(re)mapping" articulate a dynamism in how such connections are

made—traditional and *new* relations weave together. The narrative of *Reclamation* is very much a decolonial process of weaving traditional Indigenous ways of respecting and working with the land into the newly imagined situations of 150 years in the future. These Indigenous frameworks of (re)mapping can be productively used to think about other ways in which Indigenous media resist cultural and material (dis)possession of Indigenous peoples from their lands.^[7]

Ultimately, opening academic spaces to non-canonical intellectual traditions of seeing and knowing invites us to take seriously our professed claims of responsible scholarship and more fully seeing the larger worlds we navigate and mediate. It is a practice I encourage in our engagement with media as natureculture entanglements, as ecomedia.

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[1] I have shamelessly mimicked environmental historian, Jenny Price’s “**Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in LA**” to organize this essay into “ways of seeing the uses of ecomedia studies.” I have taught her essay often in my classes, and have always admired its stylistic elegance.

[2] The terms digital immigrant and digital native can be traced back to **Mark Prensky’s** work at the turn of the twenty-first century. It has been embraced *and* critiqued since then, including to question the very assumptions of the terms—native and immigrant.

[3] See for example, Rust et al. *Ecomedia: Key Issues*.

[4] As scholars James Shahanan, Michael Morgan and Mads Stensbjerre suggest mainstream messages like these actually involve a “**cultivation in reverse**”—an even lower regard for the environment.

[5] Stephen Rust’s chapter in **Ecomedia Key Issues** is one of the most eloquent overviews of ideas of media flow.

[6] Nicole Starosielski's **Undersea Network** is wonderful read.

[7] I am currently working on a monograph, *Indigenous Ecocinema: Decolonizing Media Landscapes* that draws much Indigenous studies scholarship and Indigenous intellectual thought into the realm of ecomedia scholarship.