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## Salma Monani, Associate Professor of Environmental Studies

### **Abstract**

In this first Next Page column of 2017, Salma Monani, Associate Professor of Environmental Studies, shares which films first ignited her passion for research in the environmental humanities – in particular, the intersections of cinema, environmental, and Indigenous studies; how her recent time as a Carson Fellow at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (Munich, Germany) reinforced this passion; suggested reads that range from science fiction and mystery to seminal works in ecocriticism; and which Netflix series she will dive into next.

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### **Disciplines**

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# Next Page

## Salma Monani, Associate Professor of Environmental Studies

January 20, 2017

*In this first Next Page column of 2017, Salma Monani, Associate Professor of Environmental Studies, shares which films first ignited her passion for research in the environmental humanities – in particular, the intersections of cinema, environmental, and Indigenous studies; how her recent time as a Carson Fellow at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (Munich, Germany) reinforced this passion; suggested reads that range from science fiction and mystery to seminal works in ecocriticism; and which Netflix series she will dive into next.*



Salma Monani, Associate Professor of Environmental Studies

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*What is on rotation in your media diet? Any favorite magazines, newspapers, blogs, etc.?*

I'm a devoted [National Public Radio](#) listener. It's a part of my morning routine, as I get ready for the day. Along with

[Morning Edition](#), I listen to a number of shows on a regular basis—from news shows, like [Diane Rehm's](#) and [Fresh Air](#), to those that are more storytelling based, like [Snap Judgment](#), [StoryCorps](#), and the [Moth Radio Hour](#).

I'm also a subscriber of [The Washington Post](#) and [The New York Times](#), which I try to check on a daily basis. I also make sure to try to browse [The Gettysburg Times](#) and [The Gettysburgian](#) to keep in touch with the local news.

When I'm looking for more environmental news, I check [The Guardian](#), [BBC](#), the [Science Daily](#), and the [Society of Environmental Journalists' aggregated newsfeed](#).

I follow [Indian Country Today](#) for news on Indigenous issues, since these are often not reported in mainstream media.

In all, I'd say I'm a pretty voracious news imbibor—if I see an issue that concerns me, I usually go looking for a variety of sources to try at get at all its angles.

*As an environmental humanist, your research focuses on the intersections of media (e.g., film, literature) and environmental issues. What book or film would you recommend for a novice who is interested in learning more?*

This is a relatively young field of interdisciplinary research. While there are excellent resources for novices in film (a couple of my personal favorites are Tim Corrigan's [A Short Guide to Writing about Film](#) and Malte Hagener and Thomas Elsaesser's [Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses](#)), or environmental literature (Greg Garrard's now seminal [Ecocriticism](#) is particularly good), there's really no comprehensive, introductory work that links these areas of research together in one book.

The closest we get to an accessible book for a novice that discusses film and environment is [Ecomedia: Key Issues](#) (co-edited by myself, Steve Rust, and Sean Cubitt). We compiled the book for an undergraduate audience, and each chapter introduces readers to a particular type of non-print media analyzed through an "ecocritical" angle. Ecocriticism is a term that emerged in literary studies and addresses the environmental aspects of a text. *Ecomedia: Key Issues* helps us think of how non-print media—such as photographs, comic books, film, television, or even video games, and the internet—can be "read" ecocritically to tell us something about how representations impact the environment and vice versa.

*What about for environmental justice issues, what would be a good read, or film?*

There's been some really good work in understanding environmental justice from a humanities perspective since the seminal [The Environmental Justice Reader](#) by Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein. One of my personal favorite scholarly works is Rob Nixon's [Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor](#).

In terms of creative work, there's so much out there, from novels like Ruth Ozeki's [My Year of Meats](#) and [A Tale for the Time Being](#) and Karen Tei Yamashita's *The Tropic of Orange* to nonfiction like Lauret Savoy's just published memoir *Trace*. Savoy's co-edited collection [The Colors of Nature](#) as well as the recent anthology [Sharing the Earth: An International Environment Justice Reader](#) edited by Elizabeth Ammons and Modhumita Roy are also good reads to think about environmental racism and justice.

*Who are your favorite writers or filmmakers tackling environmental justice issues today?*

I've mentioned some books above, so I'll focus on films here. Because my current research is on Indigenous cinema, I can't say enough about the many talented Native American, First Nations, and Aboriginal filmmakers whose work speak to Indigenous peoples' relations with the land. Many of the works I enjoy are not non-fictional documentaries with explicit messages of environmental justice but

instead fictional and speculative works that subtly evoke such concerns. Here are only three examples of my favorite filmmakers and their work:

Zacharias Kunuk (Inuk): Most people might be familiar with his international, award winning [Atarnarjuat](#) (aka *The Fast Runner*), but I want to give a shout out to his more recent [Magilutit](#). This is his adaptation of John Ford's *The Searchers*, which has the same sort of aesthetic as *Atarnarjuat* and is quite incredible in portraying one Inuit story of life in the Arctic.

Danis Goulet (Cree/Métis): One of Canada's most talented, up-and-coming filmmakers her work includes a number of shorts that have won film festival acclaim and are available on Vimeo or YouTube, from the social realism of [Wapawekka](#) to the sci-fi of Indigenous futurisms in *Wakening*. In both films you'll see how dislocations of Indigenous people from their land invite environmental justice readings.

Taika Waititi (Maori/Welsh): His most recent project is Hollywood's *Thor: Ragnarok*, and apparently he did some screenwriting for Disney's *Moana*. However, his earlier Maori themed works like [Boy](#) and [Hunt for the Wilderpeople](#) use the tragicomic genre of individuals coming of age as a gentle way to reflect on the legacy of settler effects on contemporary Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Of other non-Indigenous filmmakers who deal with environmental justice issues, I'd recommend Icíar Bollaín's [Tambien La Lluvia](#) (*Even the Rain*), about water rights in Bolivia and Alex Rivera's dark sci-fi *Sleepdealer* about a futuristic world where laborers work remotely due to immigration restrictions.

*What book/article/film has inspired you to take action (i.e., books/articles/films that might have inspired change in career path, activism, travel to a new place, etc.)?*

As someone who has always enjoyed reading and writing and what the natural sciences teach us about the nonhuman world around us, I found John McPhee's work was instrumental in helping me chose my academic path. In particular, his [Annals of the Former World](#), a Pulitzer Prize winning anthology that describes the wonders of the geological sciences to lay people was perfect for me as I was a geology major as an undergraduate.

Later, when I was in a PhD program contemplating a research project focused on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge debate—a debate premised on geology (whether to drill for oil or not)—I stumbled upon the activist films associated with the debate. Not all these films were just about geology; instead they highlighted important concerns being expressed by the Indigenous peoples of the area.

I became fascinated by the way the films were being used as communication tools in this complex debate. These films (for example, [Homeland: Four Portraits of Native Action](#); [Being Caribou](#); [Oil on Ice](#)) launched my interest in both cinema studies, and more specifically the intersections between cinema, environmental, and Indigenous studies.

*You just returned from a year in Munich, Germany as a Carson Fellow at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. How has this time shaped future research interests?*

Being at the [Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society](#) (RCC) and interacting with many scholars of exceptional academic caliber was really inspiring and reinforced my passion for my research in the environmental humanities.

To say a bit more: Many people and even governments, for example, Germany's, acknowledge that climate change is a reality and a scientific fact. Even if there are people who don't believe in climate change, most people agree that we should have clean and healthy environments in which to live. Yet, as societies we seem to be stuck acting in ways that prevent us from safeguarding these environments.

Why is that? I think some of the answer lies in the way media frames stories of what we should value. Much of our mainstream media implicitly but persistently asks us to be consumers of material goods, but sidelines the impacts our consumption has on labor and land. We need to continue to pay attention to media—whether it is print media like books, or non-print media such as cinema, television, or social media—to understand how it functions in the world. And, how it impacts people, localized places, and the planet as a whole. This is what environmental humanists do, and what the RCC has inspired me to continue to do.

*What are you reading now (or have read recently) that you would recommend to a friend or colleague on campus? Why?*

Regarding what I would recommend from amongst my many recent reads, I think the answer would depend on what a person is in the mood to read.

That said, if someone is looking for speculative fiction, I'd definitely recommend the anthology [Lightspeed: Science Fiction and Fantasy](#), Issue 73 (June 2016), which is called "The People of Colo(u)r Destroy Science Fiction! Manifesto"

If you happen to be a murder mystery fan, check out [The Hangman's Daughter](#) series by Oliver Pötzsch, which is all about a hangman detective in medieval Bavaria, Germany. (The qualifier here is that I probably enjoyed the series mostly because I got to read imaginative yet somewhat historical accounts of a number of places I visited while in Germany.)

I also enjoyed Mira Jacob's [The Sleepwalker's Guide to Dancing](#) and Karen Joy Fowler's [We are All Completely Besides Ourselves](#). Both novels are about individuals attempting to reconcile themselves to familial pasts and presents. They are contemplations on who, what, and how we conceive of our relatives.

Finally, if you are in the mood for some nonfiction, Mark Fiege's [Republic of Nature](#) is an environmental account of American history. It has an excellent essay on the Gettysburg battlefield. I have to thank a recently graduated student, Heather Ipsen for reminding me of this essay and Fiege's clear writing style.

*What is your favorite book or film to give as a gift?*

Again, that's so dependent on whom I'm thinking of as the recipient. There is, however, something wonderful about illustrated editions of children's literature. As an adult, I have often re-read many of my childhood favorites, and also discovered some new ones. A book I didn't have as a child but that I have subsequently read, and gifted to others, is the illustrated edition of Salman Rushdie's [\*Haroun and the Sea of Stories\*](#), and its sequel, [\*Luka and the Fire of Life\*](#).

*Who is your favorite writer of all time?*

I think I read too widely to answer this question accurately. But, here are some of my current favorites, whose works will probably be on rotation on my reading list for a while: Karen Tei Yamashita, Ruth Ozeki, Kim Stanley Robinson, Salman Rushdie, Louise Erdrich, E.M. Forster, Terry Pratchett, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Karen Joy Fowler, Sherman Alexie, Tony Hillerman, Marjane Satrapi, Jasper Fforde.

*What do you read for fun? Anything we would be surprised to find on your bookshelf? What are you planning to read/watch next?*

As has probably become apparent from the books listed above, I read widely for fun. Since I haven't mentioned any poets, perhaps you'll be surprised to find poetry on my bookshelf. However, I do enjoy poetry too, including a recent gift by a Gettysburg colleague, Prof. Will Lane's chapbook, [\*Trust Rust\*](#).

In terms of what's next on the reading/viewing list—lots of research related books I found at the book exhibit at the Association for American Studies conference I attended right before Thanksgiving, and Prof. Andy Wilson's recommendation of the Netflix original series, *Black Mirror*.

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