



2013

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Salma Monani and Miranda Brady, "ImagineNATIVE 2012: Indigenous Film Festival as Ecocinematic Space" in *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 13.3-4 (2013, online only).

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ImagineNATIVE 2012: Ecocinema and The Indigenous Film Festival

Abstract

Much scholarship points to how ecological concerns are never far from Indigenous struggles for political sovereignty and public participation. In this paper we turn to the Indigenous film festival as a relatively understudied yet rich site to explore such ecological concerns. Specifically, we highlight the ImagineNATIVE 2012 film festival based in Toronto, Canada.

Keywords

Indigenous film festival, film festivals, Toronto

Disciplines

Ecology and Evolutionary Biology | Environmental Sciences

ImagineNATIVE 2012: Ecocinema and The Indigenous Film Festival / Salma Monani and Miranda Brady

Abstract: Much scholarship points to how ecological concerns are never far from Indigenous struggles for political sovereignty and public participation. In this paper we turn to the Indigenous film festival as a relatively understudied yet rich site to explore such ecological concerns. Specifically, we consider, the Toronto-based ImagineNATIVE, a prominent hub in the Indigenous film festival circuit. Through examining the festival's 2012 film selections, we highlight films with explicit and less overt eco-activist messages. While the films themselves speak to eco-imaginings, we also draw from the festival experience to consider how the event itself participates in eco-sensibilities through its performative and embodied presence. In pairing festival analysis of website materials, reviews, and interviews with organizers and participants with ecocritical reading of films, we articulate how Indigenous film festivals serve as alternative spheres for ecological participation, and raise ecocritical questions pertinent to film festivals more broadly.

Keywords: Film festivals, Indigenous, Ecocinema, Alternative Public Sphere, ImagineNATIVE

"There's no doubt that the land is fundamental to aboriginal identity... it's like a real core, central thing about what it means to be Indigenous. Everything is informed by the land." --Lisa Jackson (Anishinaabe)

Accomplished First Nations filmmaker, Lisa Jackson (Anishinaabe) does not type herself as an environmental filmmaker. Nor is environment the central theme of her experimental 1-min short, *Snare*, which was commissioned for the 2012 ImagineNATIVE Film + Media (iN2012) festival's Stolen Sisters Digital Initiative, a special program highlighting "the struggle to find answers for the over 500 official (and arguably more) unsolved cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women across Canada."[[i]] Yet, for Jackson, as with many of the other filmmakers we spoke with at iN2012, eco-connections—being "informed by the land"—often weave into creative and activist expressions.

We interviewed Jackson by the café of the Lightbox TIFF theatre, a 5-cinema megaplex, in the heart of downtown Toronto. Around us, the Lightbox's 3-story public atriums were abuzz with iN2012 activities as Indigenous filmmakers, producers, and attendees mingled. ImagineNATIVE (iN) is organized by the Center for Aboriginal Media, and takes place annually in Toronto, Canada. Now in its thirteen year, the festival prides itself on celebrating "the latest works by Indigenous artists at the forefront of innovation in film, video, radio, and new media" ("Who We

Are," *ImagineNATIVE*). Drawing from artistic Aboriginal talent in Canada and globally, iN does not focus specifically on environmental issues but as Executive Director Jason Ryle stated in our interview with him, environmental themes are "a constant" at the festival. He elaborates:

Like the impacts of residential schools and colonization and not unlike how Jewish filmmakers will consistently talk about the Holocaust and the effects of that, or African filmmakers will talk about civil rights, Indigenous peoples in Canada always have, I think, those connections including environmental issues."

Ryle's comments are valuable as they make room to consider *how* "those connections" are being made. To better gauge these eco-engagements, we explore both the iN2012 festival as a site for showcasing Indigenous artistic expressions and also more closely examine the work of individual artists. In doing so, we place ourselves in an area of the eco-mediaspace that has been unduly neglected by film, ecocritical, and Indigenous studies scholars alike. As the emerging scholarship of film festival studies indicates, film festivals have gained immense popularity in the last thirty years, and their popularity is in part due to their function as community gathering and activism spaces (Jordanova and Shyne). At the same time, the twenty-first century turn in ecocritical studies has prompted a sub-field focused on ecocinema. The burgeoning field recognizes "environment" to extend beyond a EuroAmerican focus, which historically privileged the idea of pristine Nature/wilderness in opposition to land "defiled" by human presence. [[iii]] As articulated in the introduction to *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, "from an ecocritical perspective, environment...is the whole habitat that encircles us, the physical world entangled with the cultural" (1).

While we acknowledge that many Indigenous cultures recognize this entanglement as fundamental to their traditional worldviews (Adamson, Fixico, LaDuke) our study is in line with the works of many Indigenous scholars who understand that Indigenous perspectives are anything but fixed or singular, and Indigenous filmmaking speaks to diverse points of view (Wood; Columpar; Marubbio and Buffalohead). Drawing primarily from interviews with filmmakers and the festival's Executive Director, Jason Ryle, published materials (such as the festival website and reviews), and ecocritical analysis of various films showcased, we highlight some of the festival's eco-diversity. We describe films that range from explicit calls for environmental justice that foreground threats to Aboriginal peoples' traditional lifeways; to implicit testimonies of eco-consciousness as artists figuratively portray environment in their works; and also to a conscious move away from environment-based themes. As eco-themes are centered and de-centered on screen, we see both the diversity of Indigenous eco-expressions and the possibilities of tensions that such diversity can engender. However, we suggest that the festival's positioning as a space for active participation, civic discussion, and Indigenous solidarity is a potentially powerful site to both move beyond these tensions and also to re-center eco-themes in ways that, to borrow a phrase from Lisa Jackson reminds us how "Everything is informed by land." Below, we begin by describing the festival content, we then, turn to a topology we developed to situate the breadth of eco-engagements in iN films.

The festival: Incorporating environment into a broader Indigenous imperative

Founded in 1998, iN's mandate is to accept all types of artistic works—not just film and video, but also prints, radio, and new media works ("Mandate", *ImagineNATIVE*). Its insistence that these works come only from Indigenous artists, sets it apart from many of the other sixty-four festivals in the Indigenous film festival circuit. [[iii]] Distinguishing between iN and other Indigenous festivals that include non-Indigenous artists in their programming, Jason Ryle, Executive Director of iN2012 states, "One's not right, nor is one wrong. It's just that ours was founded to support the artists and give them [a platform for] their creative voice." Since the mid-1960s, the Canadian government has supported Aboriginal art as integral to contemporary Indigenous cultures. In the twenty-first century, this support had growing attention (Canadian Council of the Arts). In addition, Ryle explains, "We founded the festival to fill the void in the landscape here in Toronto. I mean, you're talking about a city that has over 80 film festivals a year." On the urging of Indigenous artists, iN entered Toronto's festival scene.

Today, with local audiences exceeding twelve thousand, and additional audiences as the festival tours across Canada and abroad, it is one of the largest Indigenous festivals in the world. [[iv]] Each year it has a faithful following of returning Indigenous artists and welcomes new ones. Stalwart Canadian artist, Alanis Obomsawin (Abenaki), whose documentary, *The People of Kattawapiskak River* premiered as the iN2012 opening screening, articulates in our interview with her: "Festivals are very helpful to get our work screened to the public. And I would say imagineNATIVE is the best." Elaborating, Obomsawin describes the festival's work with youth: "Not only is it wonderful for young people to come here, but [perhaps] sometimes this is the first time leaving their community... and they get here and there's always volunteers and people who will meet them and show them around." Emerging artist, Caroline Monnet (Algonquin), who has attended three iN festivals so far, attests to the festival's warm support, "It was really welcoming the first year that I'd been here. And even if I don't have a film or a project in the festival I will still try to come" (personal communication).

While the festival's primary imperative is to create a community space for Indigenous artists, since 2005 its audiences have been approximately fifty-five percent non-Indigenous (Ryle, personal communication). Strategies to draw non-Indigenous audiences include cultivating a high profile by garnering support statements not only from prominent First Nations but also Canadian government officials. [[v]] The festival also has multiple corporate sponsors, including predominantly visible, Bell Media, one of Canada's largest broadcasting firms ("The 13th Annual ImagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival," 4-5). Ryle suggests a successful marketing tactic involved appropriating mainstream pop-culture iconography into iN advertising materials. He highlights good-humored renditions such as the iN2006 posters that featured a scifi-type "attack of a fifty foot woman, but it was a fifty foot Pocahontas" and iN2012's Big Top theme, a circus motif designed to "be welcoming to all" as well as a space where "you can be amazed by all these different types of creativity." [[vi]]

As iN works with marketing strategies to attract corporate sponsors and diverse audiences, it certainly does not operate outside of capitalism or troubling environmental practices. Ryle acknowledges that iN is not "exclusively ethical" in its own environmental impact. However, he points to the festival's past ten years of fund-raising practices. Framed to emphasize social ethics, these often overlap with environmentally friendly

principles: "Part of that policy is that we don't accept or seek out fund raising from companies or corporations that directly benefit from the exploitation of Indigenous land. We don't accept money from oil or gas companies... paper companies, mining companies, logging companies; that type of thing." Also, he explains, because traditional Indigenous cultures and lands are so often threatened by environmental loss, the festival "more often than not" incorporates an environmental program stream. As the festival's archives indicate, this program stream has been co-sponsored by Toronto's Planet in Focus Environmental Film Festival since at least 2007. [[vii]]

in 2012's environmental program, titled *Rising Tides*, screened on the last day of the festival. It included the feature documentary *My Louisiana Love* (produced by Monique Verdin, a Houma) and two shorts, a music video *Mr. Businessman's Blues*, produced by and featuring Toronto-based Diem LaFortune (Cree/Metis) and a documentary *Entre Dos Aguas (Between Waters)* produced by Tarcila Rivera Zea (Quechua).

My Louisiana Love and *Entre Dos Aguas* are serious environmental narratives that discuss resource development's effects on Indigenous homelands. *Mr. Businessman's Blues* provides a more playful commentary. Billed as a "satirical music video that makes a statement on capitalism and greed," this 4-minute piece follows Diem LaFortune, singing in the tent city of Occupy Toronto and along the streets of downtown Toronto's business district. [[viii]] As LaFortune sings, "Hey Mr. Businessman, how does your money grow?" her words, and her flamboyant hat, adorned with a large red rose, sprouting daffodils, and birds in a nest coupled with her bespectacled, middle-aged face, long grey hair, everyday black, wool overcoat, bright blue sweater, red scarf, and miss-matched fingerless mittens (red and black) cheekily lampoon the contrasts evident in the rag-tag tent city and the glittering high rises and shop windows of business establishments. Referring to the video's commentary on capitalism's impact on people and places, LaFortune emphatically states, "There's no gap; it's all interrelated" (personal communication). This sentiment of interconnection is often repeated in the interviews we had with other filmmakers.

Ultimately, because it is difficult to bracket environmental concerns from many of the other political and socio-cultural concerns faced by Indigenous peoples, it is not surprising that *Mr. Businessman's Blues* is part of the *Rising Tides* program. Nor is it surprising that films in other program streams articulate eco-themes. Ryle notes that though an environmentally branded program attracts audiences seeking such content, "you can also slip other things into other types of programs," suggesting the festival engages audiences with such themes, even when they are not actively seeking an environmental program. Thus, across the festival, the presence of eco-engagements is both discernible and clearly welcomed.

To better gauge the breadth of festival films that speak to such engagements, we outline a simple spectrum that spans from films with explicit eco-statements, to implicit and buried eco-themes, and finally to a sometimes deliberate absence of such themes. In focusing on filmmakers and film texts, we do not discuss how the festival films might be read by audiences other than the filmmakers and ourselves. Acknowledging this, we understand that our spectrum does not force a film into a specific category but is open to differing interpretations. Similarly, our use of a topological system is not meant to typecast films, but rather to

demonstrate the ways in which the festival allows for creative variations on a theme in diverse ways.

The films: A spectrum of eco-engagements

I. Explicit Eco-engagements in Social Documentaries

in 2012 is replete with social documentaries in the classic sense forwarded by documentary scholars Jack Ellis and Betsy McLane—"part record of what exists, part argument for why, and in what ways it should be changed" (ix). While many appear throughout the festival, here we very briefly overview the two Rising Tides' documentaries, *My Louisiana Love* and *Entre Dos Aguas* to highlight their explicit social statements that forward messages of environmental justice and the need for change.

Entre Dos Aguas explores the problems of climate change experienced by Indigenous communities in the South Andes Mountains of Peru. While the film opens with shots of newspaper clips with headlines that cast doubt about human induced climate change—for example, one headline reads, "Tibios acuerdos sobre calentamiento global" ("Lukewarm agreements on global warming")—the film works to confront this doubt. Images of displaced people shoveling mud out of their homes are shown along with first-hand testimonies about the change in environment experienced by community members who have lived closely with these lands for generations. As the viewer is confronted by evidence of flooding caused by the melting of nearby mountain icecaps devastating traditional livelihoods and destroying the crops and homes of Indigenous communities, its message of eco-justice is loud and clear.

My Louisiana Love also explicitly discusses climate change. Structured as Monique Verdin's autobiographical journey to recover her own family and community ties, the film's environmental commentary is central to explaining some of this loss. Verdin discusses her grandmother's Houma subsistence traditions, while at the same time drawing direct parallels between climate change, human intervention in Louisiana's wetlands, and the damage caused by Hurricane Katrina. In one scene, for example, Verdin is trying to convince a skeptical relative on the phone of the link between the environmental catastrophe seen in New Orleans and climate change. She weeps openly in frustration as her relative fails to be convinced. Like *Entre Dos Aguas*, *My Louisiana Love*'s verbal testimonies couple with visual evidence to persuade the viewer of human induced climate change and the implications of ignoring it.

While these two films engage climate change, others such as those featured in the Spotlight on the Mapuche Nation directly engage issues of toxic waste (*En el Nombre del Progreso* or *In the Name of Progress*) and timber land grabs (*Wallmapu*). Taken together, these social documentaries explicitly illustrate how Indigenous environmental problems are intricately woven into a marginalizing history of colonialism, corporate theft, and land loss.

II. Implied Eco-engagements in Social Documentaries

While eco-statements are explicit in the films discussed above, a second category of eco-engagements is articulated in social documentaries where environmental commentary is implied rather than directly stated. Embedded

within a different primary focus, eco-themes are nonetheless easily evoked.

Canned Dreams directed by Katja Gauriloff (Sami), which explores factory farming, provides a subtle critique of the transnational, industrialized food complex. Its long takes and slow pans render the ordinariness and ugliness of factory kill-floors in Romania, a mega-tomato farm in Portugal, and an industrial hog farm in Denmark cinematographically stunning. It avoids voice-of-God narration, but engages its many interviewees' voices, by having them speak directly to the camera, or in voice-over, as the camera follows them about their daily work. While eco-concern is not verbalized, the juxtaposition of visual and aural content makes such concerns hard to ignore. For example, one interview features a Romanian worker whose task is to kill swine on an assembly line. The bloody (yet paradoxically always-being-sterilized) conditions where he works and his commentary make apparent both his struggle doing this work and the "efficiency" of this system. The film's lingering observational stance prompts viewers to contemplate the alienation of both worker and consumer from the wholeness and natural ecology of food. Neither a film focused on Indigenous territories, nor Indigenous struggles, *Canned Dreams* nonetheless comments on a world in stark contrast and as threat to Indigenous traditions that recognize the sanctity of food and where it comes from.

Similarly, the festival's opening film, *The People of the Kattawapiskak River*, has no overt message of eco-concern. However, Director Alanis Obomsawin's portrayal of the devastating poverty that plagues the reservation of Attawapiskat First Nation's Cree cannot be disentangled from such concerns. Like *Canned Dreams*, *The People of Kattawapiskak River* refuses to directly point fingers, instead highlighting testimonies of those living in the overcrowded, crumbling structures of the Northern reserve. Obomsawin quietly exposes cramped, sub-standard living spaces where lack of electricity, water, and infrastructure pervade; she also draws attention to colonization, politics, and the violation of treaty rights by the Canadian Government. Ironically, as the Cree cluster in barely livable spaces, too tight to perform traditional subsistence activities, nearby on traditional Cree lands is a diamond mine operated by corporate giant De Beers. In effect, while Obomsawin's documentary is about a housing crisis, it is hard to ignore that this crisis of the quality of "where we live, work, and play" is framed by environmental injustices of land and cultural theft.

Obomsawin confirms these interpretations when interviewed, stating: "Unfortunately a lot of our communities especially the northern ones, ones that are isolated from big cities, are ignored in a lot of ways and there are a lot of water problems, land and contamination with all the technology that people come with in terms of mining and natural resources." Another filmmaker, Jules Koostachin, an emerging artist with family and roots in Attawapiskat also easily sees the connections. Speaking both about Obomsawin's documentary and her own 2010 *Remembering Inninimowin*, she stated: "I knew about the housing situation, I knew about the sewage back up, the contaminated water. De Beers Diamond Mines is about 80 km away from our community, so there were a lot of things happening." She continues by referencing the controversies of the crisis: "They are doing all these reports and the reports are saying that 'We're fine. We're fine. It's all in our head, basically. Nobody's getting sick based on the contaminated water.' But how can you say that no one is being

physically or spiritually impacted by De Beers? Of course it's going to impact people. That's my grandfather's traditional hunting territory." Kootaschin's own *Remembering Inninimowin* also does not have an explicit environmental message, instead it is an autobiographical story focused on recovering her traditional language, Inninimowin. However, for Koostachin the trauma of language loss is inseparable from the trauma of land loss.

III. Implied Eco-Engagements in Experimental Film and Video

Bridging the category of social documentaries above and the more experimental films discussed in this section, is Diem LaFortune and Rebecca Garnett's *Mr. Businessman's Blues*. As a music video, in *Mr. Businessman's Blues*, the artistic expression of music takes as much precedence as its social themes. Just as LaFortune plays with music, the filmmakers highlighted in this section engage in artistic experimentation to foreground their aesthetic impulses. However, unlike LaFortune and Garnett who verbalize social injustices, filmmakers such as Caroline Monnet (Algonquin) and Tyler Hagan (Metis), do not explicitly state social themes but instead prefer to use visuals and instrumental music to do the work. In our conversation with Hagan, he explained, "I'm not telling you exactly what I want you to think by any means through language," but he suggests that his 2012 10-minute, experimental meditation *Estuary* is, of all his films, "the most straightforwardly about an environment."

Estuary features a series of shots of the Fraser River estuary in British Columbia, a significant wildlife sanctuary. Throughout several movements, Hagan sequences close-ups of the estuary's waters so that they move with the film's musical accompaniment. As the camera draws back, the viewer begins to recognize the larger ecosystem, which is in the last movement, pictured from a birds-eye perspective.

In picking the estuary as the site where the river meets the Ocean, Hagan explains, "Obviously the estuary...is part of the river where there's the most kind of human interaction, the entire lower mainland surrounding Vancouver is all along the Fraser River." While he does not overtly feature people, their traces are referenced throughout the film as with the appearance of a rectangular object in the water that resembles a doorway. He says, "...in the second part of the film I try to take a step back and include some of the structures and the kind of landscapes that include people, you know, again, it's implicit. The structure is not a natural structure, so we're not just living in a completely uninhabited landscape."

In addition to the visuals, the sound scape is central. The musical accompaniment composed by Jeff Mettlewsky augments the scenes. Consistent with how Hagan sees different components of an ecosystem as interconnected, sound recorded on location at the Fraser River estuary is used in the last section of the film to enhance a sense of place. As the viewer assumes the perspective of taking flight, looking down at the estuary from above, the music builds.

Caroline Monnet similarly believes that visuals and music can symbolically convey cultural and natural interconnections. Her 2012 *Gephyrophobia* (literally meaning "fear of bridges") includes shots of the Alexandra Bridge and the Ottawa River flowing beneath it. The bridge connects the cities of Ottawa and Gatineau and the provincial borders between Ontario and Quebec. As Monnet choreographs her black and white

shots to appear washed out and severe, the musical accompaniment matches abrupt visual cuts.

Explaining her artistic choices to focus on an iconic Canadian landmark and water body, she says her inspiration was the journey she and countless others make each day to cross the bridge back and forth for work. Raised primarily in urban communities, both in Canada and France, Monnet, says that her work generally, "deals with duality, tensions" and "memory." Thus, *Gephyrophobia* symbolizes more than concern over traffic or movement; the river was "a symbol of a barrier between language, culture, identities, philosophies." She states, "I think there's something really interesting to be explored where rivers are borders, and it becomes this symbol of bigger issues, of bigger systems, of how we implement ourselves on the land, how we live our lives, how we migrate as well."

Like with Hagan's *Estuary*, while humans do not appear on screen or narrate their presence, *Gephyrophobia's* environments are reflections of human-nature relationships. Monnet states, "Indigeneity and environment are closely-knit. Absolutely. Because instinctively we are naturally close to the landscape--to the cultural environment and natural environment--and we respect it, and it shows in our stories." While neither *Estuary* nor *Gephyrophobia* verbalize environmental intent, the films' focus on landscape clearly imply complex eco-engagements. [[ix]]

IV. Oblique Eco-engagements in Experimental and Fictional Film

Though eco-themes are easily recognized by the centrality that the filmmakers place on landscape in the experimental films above, there are yet other films, where the allegorical contours of experiment and fiction requires more concerted mining for the filmmaker's eco-intent. In effect, we find buried or oblique eco-engagements in this category of film. Jules Koostachin's short, *Niipii* that aired as part of iN2012's midnight Witching Hour stream is a poignant example.

With a tagline that states: "Trapped in a dream state, a Cree woman faces her fears through the traditional water teachings of her culture," *Niipii* begins with a woman being possessed by the spirit of a fearsome Windigo, and wandering the bush where she is confronted by a bear. The film then cuts to show a woman arriving at a pond, where she encounters the threat of loutish boys who appear to be intent on raping her. At this point, the film moves to its third part, portraying both a child rising from the pond's waters and the woman, now old, watching her younger self and the child embrace in the water. Now, the male youths of part two are portrayed not as threatening but as supportive of the elder as they stand with her looking benignly at the child and woman in the water.

The film's three-part movement is anything but easily interpreted, especially to someone without the specific Cree traditions Koostachin references. Koostachin herself laughingly states: "I was gifted this crazy dream and that was *Niipii*; I'm still trying to figure out what it actually means." [[x]] She continues more seriously, "But the moon is there, the grandmother moon, the water, the women teaching, the water teaching how to respect the women, and if you know how to respect women you'll know how to respect the earth because the earth is the women." Uncompromising in her references to Cree teachings, Koostachin further explains why she draws from traditional Cree eco-sensibilities, "It's inevitable that it's going

to come through, because that's how I was raised, and I shouldn't say privilege because it's not a privilege. This is how we should have been raised without that interruption."

In discussing "that interruption" Koostachin speaks of the impact of colonialism, "I have been raised with those survivors too, who have dealt with residential school trauma and internalized race." In dealing with the traumas of a society rapidly thrown into transition, Koostachin believes that recovering relationships with land and water are crucial, a point she allegorizes through *Niipii's* reference to the intergenerational moment of union at the pond, where the woman's present threats are transformed by the surfacing of the child and the wisdom of an elder looking on.

Similarly oblique in its eco-themes, and also expressing the theme of violence against women, is Lisa Jackson's *Snare*, which was part of the "Stolen Sisters Digital Initiative," a series of one to two minute shorts commissioned by iN. Jackson, who was raised in the urban Parkdale neighborhood of Toronto, states in our interview with her that, "None of my work is approached as an environmental film." However, as the epigraph beginning this paper suggests, she emphasizes the importance of establishing a sense of place in her films because, "I do think people are shaped by their environments." She describes her forthcoming *How Our People Live* as overtly eco-themed as it documents struggles over the forced relocation of the 'Gwasala-'Nakwaxdda'xw First Nation from traditional territories off the Coast of British Columbia in 1964.

Reading eco-concerns in *Snare* is challenging, as the film lacks audio and is set within a dark blackbox studio. Yet Jackson included "organic" elements like dirt and feathers. The film begins with a medium shot of several women's feet walking through dirt, when one of them steps in a snare. "The snare goes up," and they are shown frozen, upside down, hanging by their legs in white dresses. "They're suspended animation and feathers start to fall like snow and the women are lowered down and we see their faces for the first time." According to Jackson, close-ups humanize the women, and they are then pictured standing in a circle to signify "community." Perhaps the lack of specific location in the film helps Jackson set up the quick associations she wished to convey, "being earthly and grounded but also being down in the dirt and struggling in the dirt," and subsequently then creating a "sense of lightness, and grace and healing." Jackson explains that she will add sound to *Snare*, to generate a musical soundscape that is evocative of "wind" and "forest." Like Kootaschin's *Niipii*, Jackson's *Snare* is oblique in its eco-engagements, but draws from rich traditions of Indigenous eco-connections.

V. Absent Eco-Intent?

Even as many filmmakers of social documentaries, experimental, and fictional films attest to eco-engagements in their works, it is important to also point to those who chose to avoid these connections. For example, Jeff Dorn (Ojibway) clearly states that eco-themes were not a factor in his feature documentary, *Smoke Traders*. Exploring political wars between Indigenous reservations and federal governments over tobacco trade, Dorn's focus is dramatic imperative not place. Dorn indicates that thinking about the environment would have detracted from how to convey his primary theme of tobacco trade. In our interview with him, he states "I guess I've thought about it, but not in the context that you frame it. The conceptual idea is in my mind," but, he admits in a very tertiary sense. Other films,

such as those from the program, *Unsettling Sex* also seem to make a conscious effort to dissociate from identifying eco-themes.

Unsettling Sex, as articulated by its curator, John Hampton (Chickasaw) is primarily about the “decentering of identity.” In his presentation at the screening, Hampton highlighted how the works he chose to showcase forward a queer aesthetic that highlights questions of identity that have been extensively marginalized both within settler society, with its hegemonic legacy of “heteropatriarchal scripts,” and often by Indigenous societies themselves. For example, Kent Monkman’s (Cree) music video, *Dance to Miss Chief* (2010), features a flamboyant, “two-spirited” character played by Monkman, and inverts the noble savage stereotype by highlighting the celebration of homosexual and transgendered Indigenous identities. Monkman suggests such identities were shadowed by the sexual mores imposed by colonization and Christianity (personal communication, University of Ottawa lecture). Others, such as James Diamond’s (Cree/Metis) intensely personal, experimental rendition *I am the art scene starring Woman Polanski* (2010) and Ariel Smith’s (Cree/Ojibway/Roma/Jewish) sardonic vaudeville-echo *Target Girls*, reveal “that there is more to identity than identifying with one’s culture or standing solidly against it” (Hampton, “*Unsettling Sex*”). In their works, these latter two artists resist any sense of Indigenous representation that collude with stereotypes, including that of the oft-used trope of Indigenous peoples being ecologically grounded. [[xi]]

<36> In the following discussion, we consider some of the tensions that arise as filmmakers move away from identifying eco-themes. We also reiterate that while it is important to note filmmaker intent in eco-engagements to help outline our spectrum, all the films discussed so far become less fixed in our topology if we acknowledge that films are polyvocal and that individual audience members can read them in different ways. Moreover, we recognize, as ecocinema studies critics generally do, that no matter what the intent, most film is an intensively resource based product, in its production, distribution, and consumption. [[xii]]

Discussion:

I. Decentering Environment: Tensions in Indigenous Representation

As the many examples outlined above suggest, the range of eco-engagements represented at iN2012 is diverse. From social documentaries with explicit eco-statements (such as *My Louisiana Love*) to those that imply eco-themes (such as *Canned Dreams*), from experimental films that foreground landscape as their focus (such as *Estuary*) to fictional films that draw on traditional Indigenous land-based teachings (such as *Niipii*), and finally to films that work to avoid Indigenous eco-identity markers (such as *Target Girls*), the festival’s offerings are varied and also intensely thought-provoking. Such varied engagements speak to the diverse ways in which contemporary Indigenous peoples, living with the realities of modernity, identify themselves. For many filmmakers, traditional ties to subsistence cultures are essential markers of Indigeneity, for others, especially those more urbanized, or with more First World privileges, social and aesthetic issues of other sorts trump environmental concern and in doing so speak to artistic imperatives that work to dispel common stereotypes.

Jules Koostachin, who, as discussed earlier does see environmental concerns as central to her work, references a conversation she had with other filmmakers about eco-themes in Indigenous films. Paraphrasing another filmmaker she states, "She said something like, 'Does it always have to be land based?'" Koostachin's conversation was about explicit versus oblique themes, as she drew on her own film as well as Nanobah Becker's (Navajo) sci-fi short *The 6th World* to suggest that while Indigenous peoples can be taken off their lands, if they continue their cultural teachings, the land still informs them. However, one can easily extend this same question of eco-consciousness—"does it always have to be land based?"—to films that steer clear of eco-intent. Its articulation serves to draw attention to tensions that surface as Indigenous peoples (dis)engage with explicitly using environment as an identity marker.

While filmmakers strongly believed that an artist should have the right to choose how s/he represents the world, the sentiments of some, such as Francisco Huichaqueo (Mapuche) and Caroline Monnet allude to some of these tensions. Huichaqueo's experimental *Kulül Trawin (Reunión del Cuerpo / Reunion of the Body)*, which screened as part of the Spotlight on the Mapuche Nation program, explicitly demonstrates the social and environmental injustices perpetuated on the Mapuche people by politicians and local/international industry. Art, for Huichaqueo, is first and foremost a political tool. In our interview with him, he stated, "Maybe it's not about looking at the artistic point of view, because that is not the case in this matter." As an activist confronted by contemporary government and corporate brutality towards his people, Huichaqueo explains that he is not looking for artistic recognition, as celebrated by a festival such as iN, but is more interested in directly sharing the injustices faced by his people. He expresses skepticism that iN2012 will generate the political exigency necessary to retain Mapuche lifeways and lands. He suggests his "true opinion" is that "the powers of states are effective in trying to eliminate the positive effects of these festivals. We have to really reflect with the people that organize these festivals to explore other vehicles to effectively persuade the message across the board to the audiences."

Huichaqueo makes a case for explicitly connecting land struggles to cultural survival, however, Monnet's sentiments suggest a contrasting viewpoint. Describing her response to festival films, Monnet states, "What I personally enjoy is seeing filmmakers trying to bring those stories in a very different way that's not the victimization or, you know, 'they're cutting our trees, fight for our land.'" As an emerging Canadian-French artist whose livelihood is tied to ways she innovates and plays with the medium, for Monnet, the "artistic point of view" is crucial. In effect, we see a tension in what cinematic representation should privilege—the direct or implied message of social and eco-consciousness. For Monnet, the more subtle, or implied message can be just as important, if possibly more so, than overt calls to action.

iN accommodates these different eco-perspectives, making room for tension *and* dialogue. For example, despite her artistic preferences, Monnet acknowledges that she appreciates the festival's inclusion of films from other parts of the world, like the Mapuche communities. She states, "What I really enjoy, for example, is seeing film from the Sami, or from South America, or New Zealand, things that I am not aware of. That is really interesting and that makes the world smaller; we resemble each other as well." And Huichaqueo too highlights being "very happy to be here

because he has a space for his voice, and a chance for relations with other filmmakers."

Pointing to such nodes of tension as well as the possibilities of moving beyond them as articulated through Monnet and Huichaqueo's comments speaks powerfully to the potential of the festival space as a type of alternative public sphere, or as articulated by various film festival studies scholars as community "meeting spaces for expanding the spheres of democratic and public engagement" (Monani, 257). iN2012's inclusive welcoming of artists and publics as well as its format of multiple screenings, social events, and workshops invites pluralism, thus exposing difference and its fault lines. However, its tone is of civic discussion. That is, it ideally prompts a respectful and critical exchange of ideas to move forward *together* towards something better for Indigenous expression and realities. Many filmmakers emphasized this sense of congenial camaraderie and articulated how it provided opportunity to grow as an artist and as a member of the Indigenous community.

Such exchange, as we discuss below, is also useful in making visible the eco-tensions that emerge through cinematic production, distribution and reception practices that mark not only Indigenous cinemascesapes but all media and festivals. In effect, iN2012 helps us consider the specific potential of festival spaces in re-thinking both the eco-messages on screen and the contexts in which these screens are embedded.

II. Recentering Environment: Tensions in Ecocinema Representations

As Steve Rust and Salma Monani write in their introduction to *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, cinema, with its "various technologies, from lights and cameras, to DVDs and even the seeming immateriality of the internet, involve the planet's material resources and serve as an indictment of cinema's direct role in transforming and impacting our ecosystems" (2). As they also point out, the ecological repercussions of such resource use has not always been the concern of filmmakers or even film scholars (2). Recently, however, a number of ecocinema scholars cite a 2006 University of California-Los Angeles report, "Sustainability in the Motion Picture Industry" as evidence that Hollywood, and by extension the global film industry, is notoriously complacent in its abuse of the environment (Bozak; Huemann and Murray; Willoquet-Marcondi). In *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, Natural Resources*, Nadia Bozak provides a particularly compelling critique of such abuse by correlating the rise of film technologies to the rise of fossil fuel economies. She writes, "cinema is environmental; it is shot through with an ecological loop..Once this fundamental relationship is recognized, cinema—all cinema—can be constituted as a product of and partner in civilization that is not just industrialized but hydrocarbonized" (4).

While Bozak's book ends with a chapter on Indigenous media, specifically the Nunavut entity, Isuma TV, to suggest that Indigenous film and media is a corrective to the mainstream global film industry, being "by default" of low-resource use (Bozak, 15) international film festivals such as ImagineNATIVE complicate this assessment. Housed in downtown Toronto, a thriving center of global commerce, and specifically in the cavernous structure of the TIFF 5-story multiplex, iN2012 attests to its part in the industrialized and hydrocarbonized economy. [[xiii]] Also, as an international festival it encourages global participation, welcoming audiences and bringing in filmmakers from locations as far-flung as the

Mapuche Nation in Latin America and the Maori lands of New Zealand. The two authors of this paper, each travelled a day's journey (one by car and one by airplane) to attend. It is also a travelling festival. These are important points to make, for while the festival makes an effort to be socially responsible, not accepting money from companies that are known offenders of Indigenous land rights, corporate and industrial entities penetrate into festival activities in other ways. Disentangling from troublesome social and environmental impacts in an economically driven world is not easy.

The presence of economic constraints is also represented by artists such as Nanobeh Becker (Navajo) and Jeff Dorn. Both discussed how mainstream expectations and commercial imperatives in the established film industry hinder creative deviations from the norm. Referring to an upcoming film adaptation of King Lear that he is working on, he says, "When you talk to broadcasters and say Aboriginal they go deaf in one ear, and say Shakespeare and they go deaf in the other ear. It's a hard road..We basically have no budget."

Filmmakers such as Dorn often "work with what they have" if they can (personal communication). However, in doing so, they also often ignore environmental considerations as other priorities take center stage. In making *Smoke Traders* Dorn's driving imperative was not necessarily economic limitations but the story. Describing how *Smoke Traders* covers territory from Mohawk reservations on the US-Canada border to Las Vegas in Nevada, he states, "Wherever the story is happening is the reason why I will travel there and I will spend whatever I can to get there." The environmental footprint of such travel is not at the top of Dorn's list of concerns.

Such artistic imperatives also affect filmmakers who do see their work as eco-themed. Specifically, these motives often subordinate environmental concerns in the production process. For example, Lisa Jackson while drawn to the figurative power of organic dirt, had to deal with some very smelly, "toxic" dirt for *Snare's* production. As she stated in a blog entry for iN, which also features a photo of the truckload of dirt, after two days of "nausea and headaches" for the crew and cast, "It had to go" (Jackson, "The Making of Snare"). The post also alludes to how this decision to not use the dirt was not necessarily easy, both from its two days of use and from the scramble to get another huge truckload delivered. In effect, privileging eco-concern over economics and aesthetics is not always easily reconcilable in practice.

Jules Koostachin also reflects on the production dilemmas of *Niipii*. Specifically, she points to the irony of shooting the pond scene, which, in the film, is a place of recovery: "The water was basically disgusting to go in... We had to compromise a lot and then the little girl went inside the water, that was the Toronto water, and she was a little native girl too." However, shooting primarily in Toronto, where she lives, and in the mountains around Banff, Koostachin works to draw her viewers' attention to some of these contradictions too. In its initial appearance, the pond is clearly identified as a drab, polluted space in the film.

Nanovah Becker (Navajo) also actively reflects on how the eco-themes she articulates on screen can echo in her everyday practices of living. Discussing film production on Navajo homelands, Becker recalls an elder chastising the film crew on their wasteful use of water and other

resources. Becker remembers the impact it had on her, "Exactly don't waste. That makes sense on so many levels: environmental sustainability level and monetary level, budget. After that, I definitely take it into consideration. Even on *The Sixth World* [set], at lunch we had so much left over food and I tried to give it away instead of just throwing it away."

Becker's words, and the experiences and reflections of Jackson and Kootaschin, are valuable as they suggest how environmental impact can be made both visible and also relevant to filmmakers of all stripes—from those who actively respect land and elders as essential markers of Indigenous identity to those who might be less enamored by such connections yet need to consider their film costs. In effect, they articulate how *all* media, not just media portraying eco-themes, is dependent on the land and its resources.

However, just as it is naive to think that Indigenous identity, eco-based or otherwise, can be easily articulated, it would be incredibly foolish to suggest that eco-consciousness can alone counter the complexity of socio-economic constraints on film production, distribution, and reception. [[xiv]] Yet, there is something to be said about rendering the invisible visible, of reminding us of the neglected "other" in a space such as a festival that is ideally framed to encourage dialogic and democratic exchange.

Conclusion

We began this article by considering how the iN2012 festival represents eco-engagements. Drawing primarily from interviews with filmmakers and the festival's Executive Director, Jason Ryle, published materials (such as the festival website and reviews), and ecocritical consideration of various films showcased, we suggest the range of engagements spans from explicit to implicit to oblique to absent presentations of eco-themes. Such diversity attests to the plurality of Indigenous experiences and demonstrates the particular socio-cultural, ideological, and material histories that individual filmmakers bring with them to the festival. As suggested by the comments of Caroline Monnet and Franscisco Huichaqueo these differences do point to possible tensions; at the same time, importantly, the festival space encourages a productive dialogue through its emphasis on Indigenous solidarity.

We suggest that the positioning of iN as a participatory space for the exchange of ideas also makes it a compelling site to consider how eco-themes, so central to so many filmmakers, can migrate from screen into the practices of media production, distribution, and reception. One can fault iN itself as environmentally troubling positioned as it is in downtown Toronto, and participating in capitalist activities such as marketing, ticket sales, infrastructure use, and other practices of modernity. However, its awareness of its own social ethics (as suggested by its fund-raising policies), its frank honesty (at not being "exclusively ethical" when considering the environment but nonetheless aware), and its openness to new and innovative ideas (as suggested both by its mission statement and the repeated praises of our interviewees) is promising. Specifically, such characteristics speak to a critically reflective cultural ethos, which despite being circumscribed by capitalism, indicates a pioneering and adaptive philosophy. In an era coined the Anthropocene, [[xv]] where human impacts on the environment seem to generate more obvious and devastating environmental impacts on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous

communities alike, democratic and transnational participatory arenas of Indigenous festivals such as iN are suggestive spaces to productively re-imagine our relationships with each other and the more-than-human world, and to borrow a phrase from Lisa Jackson, understand how "everything is informed by land."

NOTES

[i] *ImagineNATIVE*. Web. 21 March, 2013, <http://imaginenative.org/festival2012/SSDI>. This is the festival's official website. All subsequent website citations with *ImagineNATIVE* indicate the same access date. In addition, complete bibliographic information of all films cited in this article can be located through *ImagineNATIVE*'s website and links.

[ii] Ecocritical studies is an interdisciplinary field of research that has its roots in literary studies. Its early studies (Thoreauvian nature writing, British Romantic poetry) privileged environment as wilderness. However, informed by scholarship in environmental history, philosophy, and cultural studies, it now recognizes environment as a much more complex and problematic construct. While there is plenty of scholarship to mark this turn, two recent references that capture the expanded breath of ecocritical understandings include Stephanie LeMenager, Teresa Shewry, and Ken Hiltner's edited *Environmental Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* and Katrina Dodson's "Introduction: Eco/Critical Entanglements" of the 2011 special issue of *Qui Parle*.

[iii] Amalia Cordova's "Towards an Indigenous Film Festival Circuit" in Dina Iordanova and Leshu Torchin's *Film Festival Yearbook 4: Film Festivals and Activism* (2012) provides an overview of the sixty-four festivals.

[iv] Audience numbers are quoted from Ryle's recollection of iN2011 data. For evidence of travel, see, for example, *ImagineNATIVE "News"* where press releases such as "ImagineNATIVE at the Berlinale" (4 February 2013) and "Free ImagineNATIVE Sing-Along (and Screenings) at Six Nations" (22 November 2012) appear.

[v] The 2012 festival program, and past archives, point to patronage statements from Canadian government officials as prominent as Canada's Prime Minister and the British Crown's representative, the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, as well as First Nations officials such as the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations and President of Inupiat Tapiriit Kanatami. See "The 13th Annual *ImagineNATIVE* Film + Media Arts Festival" program (*ImagineNATIVE*, 2012), 22-23.

[vi] See *ImagineNATIVE* to play the promotional trailer.

[vii] The iN website lay-out of the festival changes from 2006 to 2007, making sponsorships a little more transparent. Planet in Focus is a popular environmental film festival, which as its website describes was established a year prior to iN, in 1997, and while it too, like iN,

includes large corporate sponsors (for example, Discovery World and ING Bank of Canada), its ethical principles include commitment to eco-friendly practices in film and video productions.

[viii] See video's tagline at *ImagineNATIVE*, "Mr. Businessman's Blues". The video is also freely accessible at YouTube (Accessed March 22, 2013<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhkPftvyQm0>).

[ix] Interestingly, the term "ecocinema" was first coined in reference to such landscape films. See Rust and Monani. "Introduction."

[x] Kootaschin also states her dream was influenced by Don Miguel Ruiz's *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom* (San Rafael, Amber-Allen Publishing, 1997), which she was reading at the time.

[xi] There is plenty written about the trope of Indigenous people in harmony with nature. See for example, Michael Harkin and David Lewis Rich, eds. *Native Americans and the Environment*, which includes essays by Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples responding to Shepard Krech's controversial *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*.

[xii] See specifically Nadia Bozak's *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, and Natural Resources*; See also, essays in Rust, Monani, and Cubitt, eds. *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*.

[xiii] TIFF's webpage does not specify environmental standards and does not claim to be LEED certified, however, completed in 2010 by the award-winning Architectural Firm, Kuwabara Payne McKenna and Blumberg (KPMB), it probably meets federal, state, and city environmental codes and energy efficiency standards.

[xiv] As many ecocritics articulate, "expressed values" do not always translate to "operative values" for a variety of reasons. See, for example, James Farrell, *The Nature of College*.

[xv] The term Anthropocene is a relatively recent one that has gained popularity to suggest that we live in a geological "epoch" driven by human induced change. While some geologists debate its scientific legitimacy because it is hard to pin-down when exactly humans began to affect Earth's geology irreversibly, environmentalists and a number of scientists are in favor of legitimizing its use to highlight the scale of current human impact on the planet. For a short summary of the debate see Joseph Stromberg's "What is the Anthropocene and Are We in It?"

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Acknowledgments: We extend our thanks to iN2012 festival organizers and to all the filmmakers who shared their time and insights with us.