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## Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age by Nicole Seymour

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## Dissident Affects in Strange Times

### ***Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age* by NICOLE SEYMOUR**

U of Minnesota P, 2018. \$26.95 USD

Reviewed by **DELIA BYRNES**

Mainstream environmentalism, as it turns out, is bad for the environment. This is one of the underlying ideas informing Nicole Seymour's *Bad Environmentalism*, in which she joins a cohort of scholars who take to task the exclusionary domain of contemporary Euro-American environmental thought. While a number of critics, including William Cronon, Stacy Alaimo, Kim TallBear, and Jennifer Ladino, for example, have illuminated the inherent privileging of the white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender, and able-bodied subject in mainstream environmental art, activism, and criticism, Seymour pivots her focus to the restrictive range of affects and sensibilities that undergird contemporary environmentalism. Citing the dominant affective paradigm of the Western environmental tradition, which relies on affects such as nostalgia, wonder, enchantment, reverence, and love, Seymour tests out the potential of "dissident" affects and sensibilities, including perversity, playfulness, ignorance, frivolity, indecorum, camp, irony, and irreverence. This assemblage constitutes "bad environmentalism": environmental thought that deploys traditionally denigrated affects as a mode of critique. If, as she suggests, environmentalism tends to lack self-reflexivity, the sensibilities she studies here embody a vibrant alternative tradition based on self-awareness, flexibility, and an "unnatural" approach to

"natural" environments (231). *Bad Environmentalism* is animated by the interlinked questions, "How are we supposed to feel in our relations with environment and living creatures, what happens when we do not feel that way, and how do [the works studied here] represent or help us understand that state of play?" (21).

Seymour's study is both a theorization of an alternative environmental tradition and a metacritique of the underlying assumptions that guide mainstream environmental activism and scholarship. She begins by situating her argument within one of the most peculiar paradoxes of our environmental present: the meeting of increasingly irrefutable climate science with skepticism, denial, and inaction. This paradox, she reminds us, directly contradicts the "knowledge-deficit hypothesis," which holds that lack of information is the primary cause of public apathy (45). In an effort to address the crucial problem of environmental inaction, *Bad Environmentalism* tests out the provocative hypothesis that the sensibilities associated with the mainstream environmental movement—sanctimony, self-righteousness, and sentimentality—may be at least partly to blame for the widespread resistance to climate science and activism. As she suggests, "environmental and political stances are more a matter of emotion than rational knowledge" (230). For this reason, she assembles an archive of texts that expand the affective repertoire of environmental thought to encompass alternative affects and sensibilities.

*Bad Environmentalism* is deeply shaped by the contributions of queer theory, from its refusal of "purity politics" (232) and its embrace of "improper affiliation" (115) to

its focus on non-normative environmental affects (disgust, frivolity, camp) and its specific objects of study, such as the delightfully irreverent Canadian multimedia project the Lesbian National Parks and Services (LNPS), created by Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan. In her third chapter, for example, Seymour mounts a rejoinder to contemporary ecocritical paradigms (such as new materialism) that implicate social constructionism in the popular disregard for nonhuman environments. Emphasizing the vital role of social constructionism in queer politics, Seymour instead sketches a theory of queer environmental performance that acknowledges the environmental relevance of “artifice” (116).

Seymour consistently challenges the assumptions and values of mainstream environmental knowledge by employing a range of analytical approaches including conventional close reading, surface reading, historical contextualization, and rhetorical analysis. *Bad Environmentalism* engages an irreverent and promiscuous archive that spans narrative film (Mike Judge’s *Idiocracy* [2006]), documentary (Davis Guggenheim’s *An Inconvenient Truth* [2006]), televised nature-programming and its parodies (*Wildboyz* [2003-2006] and *Green Porno* [2008]), performance art (the LSNP and Queers for the Climate), poetry, and prose fiction. Seymour canvasses a range of under-examined “bad environmentalist” texts and performs persuasive, engaging, and frequently delightful analyses of subjects including “ignorance as environmental ethos,” queer environmental performance, “racialized environmental affect,” and the “aspirational environmentalism” that implicates environmental thought in the promise of middle-class modernity (233).

Two of the freshest and most exciting chapters revolve around a “serious” engagement with ignorance in *Idiocracy* and Hannes Lang’s documentary *Peak* (2013), and a consideration of the environmental affects that cohere around the figures of the “Ecological Indian” and the “Urban African American.” In her fourth chapter, “Animatronic Indians and Black Folk Who Don’t,” Seymour recovers strategies of irony and irreverence in Black and Indigenous environmental thought, tracing the ways in which artists of colour employ “bad” affects as a “literary and *literal* survival strategy” (188; emphasis in original). She is careful to note—albeit briefly—that the dissident affects examined throughout her study figure differently for different cultural actors. Where American entertainer Steve-O, for example, enjoys the “latitude” of white masculinity throughout his irreverent series *Wildboyz*, Black and Indigenous people of colour are rarely afforded this freedom (188). Given her overall project of identifying and challenging the “affective status quo” of white, middle-class environmentalism (18), it would have been valuable to see a discussion of the ways in which the “mainstream” sensibilities she critiques, such as earnestness and sentimentality, for example, carry an immediate urgency for communities who exist on the frontlines of environmental toxicity and pollution.

One of Seymour’s most valuable critiques is her indictment of the scholarly tendency to approach environmental art and cultural production through an instrumentalist lens that evaluates a work based on its capacity to spark measurable action. Looking “beyond the standard ecocritical question of whether a work educates its audience or spurs successful environmentalist action,” Seymour adopts a

distinctly *non*-instrumentalist approach as she engages environmental art as metacritique, catharsis, and cultural diagnosis rather than solely as prescription (233). Given the increasingly flawed assumption that environmental knowledge will inevitably lead to action, Seymour's *Bad Environmentalism* creates a space to engage with texts and critical approaches that question, ironize, and challenge the limits of environmental knowledge and feeling, and that open up new ways of thinking ecologically.

**DELIA BYRNES** is a PhD candidate in the Department of English at the University of Texas at Austin. She researches energy and environment in contemporary art and media, and her current project examines the relationship between oil infrastructure and narrative form in fictions of the U.S. Gulf Coast energy regime. Her reviews and essays have appeared in *The Global South* and *The E3W Review of Books*.