Environmental Humanities with Joni Adamson

Building multispecies empathy and ecological engagement through shared cultural touchstones.

Ages: All ages, primarily adults **Time:** Long-term

Introduction: In the early 2000's, scientists began to discuss the idea of the Anthropocene, a geologic era defined by human activity. Humanist scholars have studied the human world for centuries, so have vital contributions to understanding the Anthropocene. Environmental Humanities as a field creates space for these different perspectives on the same theme to interact. Much of academic history over the past century has focused on separating fields from each other, especially distancing sciences from humanities, but this rift is relatively recent and can still be healed to promote a more holistic perspective. Environmental Humanities as a field attempts to bridge this gap.

Learning themes: Multispecies perspectivism, interdisciplinary research, boundary objects

Mentorship and Research Approach - *Using cultural and literary analysis to expand students' understanding of their entanglement with each other and the biosphere.*	
Background	Joni Adamson is one of the founders of the field of environmental humanities. She helped organize the Diversity Caucus at the Association for Literature and the Environment, the Environmental Justice Caucus at the American Studies Association, and was president of the Association of Literature and the Environment. She is also the founding director of the UNESCO bridges flagship hub–the first humanities-led sustainability coalition within the UN. For more than two decades, Adamson has helped integrate environmental studies more thoroughly into the humanities, and environmental humanities more thoroughly into sustainability studies. Adamson is the the President's Professor of Environmental Humanities in ASU's Department of English and the Co-Director of the Humanities for the Environment Global Network's North American Observatory.
Key focal points	Entangledness is not new ● Indigenous societies and some Asian religions have acknowledged the entangledness of life for thousands of years ● Entangledness reentered the world of Western Science in the 1870s, when Darwin used "the tangled bank" as a metaphor. He used the image of an eroded bank–with the tangle of codependent roots and

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	fungi and soil organisms exposed as a way to describe how ecological communities and processes are inextricably intertwined. ● Environmental humanists have been approaching systems from this angle for decades. Our world is full of myriad perspectives and kinds of intelligence. ● As outlined by Temple Grandin, our world is a spectrum of minds, and locating ourselves on that spectrum can help us see things from other living beings' perspectives and develop more empathetic relationships with them. ● The pressure from previous generations of science to not anthropomorphize animals hinders us from making these empathetic connections where we begin to see the world from another species' perspective. This goes back to Descartes and other Enlightenment thinkers who viewed animals as machines organized within a hierarchical chain of being. Avoiding Unnecessary Political Division ● Our world is increasingly politically divided, and academia is no exception. In order to ensure every student feels that they can engage and keep discussion from falling into polarizing traps, Adamson tries to sidestep linguistic trigger words. For instance, the word "climate change" can elicit a negative reaction from some conservative students, so Adamson instead frames these conversations in terms of forest behavior or environmental dynamics. By framing conversations in more subtle ways, Adamson facilitates a space for communication across perceived boundaries. ● Everything is political these days, so it's best to let the students lead in that inevitable conversation. The importance of keywords ● Language creates meaning, so consistency and clarity on the meaning of key terms is important for collaboration and multidisciplinary scholarship.
Case Study [Example?]	Adamson's courses use literature and film as a gateway to introduce students to conversations about entanglement.

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	One film she uses is *Avatar,* which addresses many of the pressing crises of our extractive relationship with nature. But more importantly to Adamson, the movie is built on the network science of forests–where rhizomes and roots are interconnected, exchanging information and nutrients, as well as caring for and communicating with each other through chemical processes. New scientific findings that support the existence of these networks are catching up to many Traditional Ecological Knowledges that have long understood these concepts. In *Avatar*, James Cameron explores these ideas (albeit in a flawed way) through the image of Hometree, which Adamson juxtaposes with Indigenous readings to guide students through interdisciplinary analysis. This not only shows students one way to do entangled research, but also reveals how cultural pieces such as a film can help bring findings from academia and cultural tradition into the public conversation. In her "Food, Film, and Culture" class, Adamson begins by asking students to bring in a recipe for their family's favorite dish. Where does this dish come from? What does that say about your family's history or ethnicity? Students are prompted to figure out not only the ethnography of how the recipe developed and came to their family, but also the social-ecological roots and origins of ingredients. Tracing ingredients back to "the seed" reveals how the history of plants is inextricably entangled with the history of human society. Often, white students say their family recipe is not ethnic, which opens a door to explaining what ethnicity is and how societal norms around it can be formed. "We all come from somewhere," and recognizing that is an important step towards forming a more empathetic worldview. On the other side of the spectrum, some students who felt embarrassed about their foodways (i.e. having their lunch or celebratory meal called weird and stinky), learn through this process that the rich cultural history that created this food is unique and worth celebrating. Foodways evolve in concert with ecological dynamics, so this also provides a lens into understanding how our diets are both shaped by and shape ecosystems. Currently, Adamson is helping lead the Storying Just Futures (SJF) program as part of ASU's Create the Change initiative. This program depended on federal grants that were revoked by the Trump administration due to word choice, so they had to change their trajectory. In response, the initiative aims to equip researchers to navigate linguistic and political hurdles by learning to advocate for justice through futures thinking. Futures thinking has long been used for both good and ill, and equipping students with an understanding of

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	this history is key to teaching and using it correctly. Building on this history and looking to the future, Adamson highlights the efforts of groups such as the UN and UNESCO to leverage futures thinking to empower youth to imagine scenarios other than apocalyptic desolation. Young people today are discouraged about the trajectory of the world, at least in part because culture keeps presenting doom-and-gloom forecasts that keep them within an "apocalyptic box." SJF aims to foster visions of more hopeful, entangled, community-engaged, multi-species justice work. What are the new key words will we be using? What are the vital skills for the future that is upon us?
Reflection	Adamson has been pushing the rock up the hill for a quarter century, pushing to integrate humanities in sustainability science. It hasn't been easy, especially because humanities are not well funded, but ASU has been receptive to interdisciplinary sustainability research (in step with the UN) in a way few other universities are. Environmental Humanities can help us understand how narrative, whether it is speculative fiction, storytelling, or family food ways, can stimulate conversations about the natural world and our entangled place within it. These kinds of cultural artifacts are more familiar to students than academic readings, so can help serve as an open door into discussing interspecies relationships and Indigenous knowledge. These kinds of boundary objects help center the class (whether the conversation is about food or forests) in a way that unites people around shared experiences as opposed to political or academic perspectives. The future is complex and uncertain, and there are more than one future trajectory for us. How do we envision that future? What is plan A, B, and C? Environmental justice, community engaged work, multispecies justice and other environmental humanities topics are "genies released from their bottles." So as we move into the future we must keep pushing the rock up the hill or be crushed by it. Fortunately, according to Adamson, we might be at the top of the hill, with the hope of embracing downhill momentum to create a more entangled understanding of the world that can support more just action for a sustainable future.
Resources	Haraway, D. (2013). *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature.* Routledge. Haraway, D. (2015). Anthropocene, capitalocene, plantationocene, chthulucene: Making kin. Environmental humanities, 6(1), 159-165. De Castro, E. V. (1998). Cosmological deixis and Amerindian perspectivism. *Journal of the Royal anthropological Institute*, 469-488. De Castro, E. V. (2005). Perspectivism and multinaturalism in indigenous

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	America. *The land within*, 36. Anna Sing - human-rhizomatic entanglements Rose, D. B. (2000). *Dingo makes us human: Life and land in an Australian Aboriginal culture.* CUP Archive. Grandin, T. (1997). Assessment of stress during handling and transport. *Journal of animal science*, 75(1), 249-257. Grandin, T., & Panek, R. (2013). The autistic brain: Thinking across the spectrum. *Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.*

Reflection:

Dr. Adamson has worked to reveal the entanglement of humans and the environment and work towards making education entangled in the same way. Similar to Dan (though interestingly from a very different academic field), for Joni the word "ecosystem" implicitly encapsulates the inextricable entanglement of humans and nature. Adamson views environmental humanities as the perfect discipline to help reveal this entanglement, which she approaches through the use of boundary objects to foster the capacity for expanded empathy. Films are one entry point for students into conversations about entanglement, such as *Avatar*, which raises questions of multispecies empathy and relationships. Similarly, conversations around food, something we all hold in common, can establish a common ground from which we can learn to appreciate diversity. Increasing students' capacity for multiethnic and multispecies empathy is vital to prepare them to research and live within entanglement.