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CENTERING AFRICA IN ECOMEDIA STUDIES

Interview with Cajetan Iheka

Miriam Tola, Kiu-wai Chu, and Stephen Rust

This conversation discusses how Cajetan Iheka's book *African Ecomedia: Network Forms, Planetary Politics* contributes to ecomedia studies by centering Africa as a key site for media production, consumption, and disposal. This volume, published by Duke University Press in 2021, combines the focus on the socioecological effects of global media processes in postcolonial African nations, with the attention to the transformative agency of African visual artifacts representing at once ecological violence and more sustainable modes of living. This work invites ecomedia studies to address the materiality of media in relation to Africa's place within planetary networks of extraction and waste while also considering the continent as a site of creative expressions of futurity. The book comprises five chapters addressing a rich media archive produced in African locations, from Ghana to Kenya, Senegal to South Africa, and spanning video art, photography, documentary, and fiction film. Ihneka's case studies include, among others, Wanuri Kahiu's science fiction short film *Pumzi*, set in a future of ecological devastation following the Water Wars in East Africa; Pieter Hugo's *Permanent Error*, a photograph series depicting the recycling of technological waste in Agbogbloshie, Ghana; the safari images of Cecil, the lion killed in 2015 by a white American shooting big game in Zimbabwe, and its connections to the Black Lives Matter protest in the United States. *African Ecomedia* is the winner of the 2022 Ecocritical Book Award of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) and the 2022 African Studies Association Best Book Prize. This conversation took place online in July 2022 and was edited and condensed via email, with the participation of Miriam Tola, Kiu-wai-Chu, Stephen Rust, and Antonio López.

MIRIAM TOLA: Can you talk about your definition of ecomedia in *African Ecomedia*?

CAJETAN IHEKA: My focus in this book is on artworks and media practices that are set in Africa or produced by Africans. My thinking about ecomedia encompasses textual and visual materials, mass media and electronic media. I am also interested in resource media such as oil and uranium that are extracted in Africa and travel across the world, as well as their impact on elemental media such as air and water. The book is about the role of Africa in the process of producing, consuming and disposing media as well as the ecological significance of these media processes. I provide a broad definition of ecomedia that includes

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cultural artifacts as well as the infrastructural and material dimension of media. As I explain in the book, *African Ecomedia* offers a model for ecological media studies for the twenty-first century.

KIU-WAI CHU: Your book focuses mainly on visual media, particularly photography. What is the role of text and context in defining the significance of the visual in ecomedia studies? Can we detach an image from its specific textual descriptions when we study ecomedia?

CAJETAN IHEKA: In the book's introduction I address the question of the visual and why it is crucial in the way I am seeing ecomedia. I agree that what we see is constructed: in every media form, including the literary text we are getting a point of view, a perspective. But at the same time, it seems to me that in ecomedia, in media studies and the environmental humanities, the locations that I am interested in have been sidelined. African places have been out of sight. Addressing visuality becomes then a way for foregrounding a region that has not really gotten the centrality it deserves in scholarly conversations. Over the past decades there has been this proliferation of cultural and media production in Africa. Recently, African literary culture has gotten a lot of attention through the Booker Prize, the Nobel Prize and the French Goncourt being won by African writers. This is an acknowledgement of the vital literary ecosystem that is African literature right now but this renaissance is not just happening in literature; it is happening in visual culture too. Part of what I am doing is to deprivilege, to unsettle the logic that puts the printed text and the literary work above the visual. This is a way to pay respect to the amazing work that African artists and creatives produce, to acknowledge their role in our ecological imaginary. Further, the turn to the visual draws on a broader Black critical tradition where exposure has been central to the work of critique. Of course, there's a problem of commodification and objectification that comes with exposure, but overtime Black thinkers and Black people have used exposure as a way to draw attention to anti-Blackness, to racism and to the value of Black lives. In the book introduction I talk about the mother of Emmett Till and her decision to expose her son's body in order to force a reckoning with lynching and the racial climate. The visual turn draws from this tradition of really laying bare violence for the purpose of reckoning. A lot of the images that I discuss in the book are uncomfortable to watch, for example the images of workers connected to the oil economy in the Niger Delta (Chapter 3). The racial economy of Blackness contributes to this discomfort but we must confront these images. If we are consumers of what pollutes the Niger Delta inhabitants and other sites I discuss, the least we can do is to refuse to look away; to deal with the discomfort that comes from looking at those images. There are epistemological, ethical and political stakes in the visual turn, but I must also say that the visual is not studied in isolation here. In fact, that kind of isolationist critique is impossible. Visual materials are in collaboration with what you call "textual description" throughout my work, a move that foregrounds ecological relation not only as theme but also as method. Linking visual texts and other forms of texts and working across media, I uphold ecological relation as both matter and method.

MIRIAM TOLA: You mentioned the use of exposure in the Black critical tradition. Do you see ethical and political overlaps in Emmett Till mother's exposure of her son's body, and the photos of Pieter Hugo that expose electronic waste pickers in Ghana?

CAJETAN IHEKA: There is a clear distinction between Emett Till mother's decision and the work of a photographer like Hugo. I acknowledge and respect this difference. However, I also think that it is important for scholars in the humanities to pay attention to how artworks, including Hugo's images, can have a transformative ecological impact despite being entangled in processes of commodification. There are questions of commodification even when we're dealing with other representations, such as when someone writes fiction or nonfiction depicting minority communities. My point is: what else is possible in the visual economy of looking? I refuse to accept that what we're seeing here is *just* objectification and commodification. It seems to me that that's the overused answer; I am interested in what else these images can do. It is worth returning to the Black critical tradition of exposure again. In protests in the Niger Delta, for example, you see women exposing their upper bodies in protest against oil companies. These women's bodies risk objectification and even exoticization but there's something else that their exposed bodies can do. These are bodies in dissent and there is a spiritual dimension of resistance activated in their bareness that deserves serious consideration. I recognize the power dynamic between a photographer like Hugo and the people in his images in Chapter 2, but I still think that something redemptive can occur through those images. What interests me is the transformative agency of images.

STEPHEN RUST: One of the images you discuss is that of Cecil the Lion killed by a North-American big-game hunter in Zimbabwe in 2015. Depending on the viewer, this image could be read as "environmental" or simply as a trophy image. Could you address this point? On a more general level, how much emphasis do you place on the ecological intent of cultural producers as opposed to the viewer's interpretation of their texts?

CAJETAN IHEKA: The image of Cecil the Lion is a trophy image, one connected to white supremacy or racism. It was taken for specific reasons and purposes. But when it circulated, its meaning changed, it acquired other meanings, becoming for some an ecological image drawing attention to the depletion of wildlife. In thinking about Cecil the Lion's image in terms of ecological violence across bodies and across entangled spaces, I'm interested not just in the violence of Cecil the Lion's death but also of events happening in the diaspora very far from the Zimbabwean context of origin. I am concerned with the relation between the killing of Cecil in Africa and questions of anti-Black racism, in how his image allow us to raise uncomfortable but important questions about the entanglements between vulnerable Black people and decimated animal bodies. I'm interested in how this relation is of the present but also historical and allows us to make sense of this image as an ecological artifact. To address the second part of the question, I focus on the reader, the viewer and the meaning that emerges in the act of viewing. Meaning is negotiated through the relation between the intention of the producer, the text, and the context of viewing. It's this interplay that produces meaning.

KIU-WAI CHU: How are people in Zimbabwe and Africa reacting to the global circulation of Cecil the Lion's images? What does it say about local ecomedia?

CAJETAN IHEKA: People in Zimbabwe and Africa are aware of the global circulation of the images of Cecil the Lion. They point out that the death of one of them would not elicit the same kind of response across the world. They draw attention to an ecological imbalance, an ecological inequality that makes it possible for the life of Cecil as a charismatic animal to be more valued than human lives. There is an ecological hierarchy of beings in privileging the life of Cecil over the lives of African people. This is not new, it is an historical problem. It is the same problem for which local communities have been displaced to make room for animals and for white people who can enjoy wildlife. Thus, for local people the global response to Cecil's killing fits into a history of dispossession and centuries of oppression. To connect this point to discussions on ecomedia, it is important to recall that the logic of dispossession and marginalization also applies to media production. So, when the image of Cecil is produced for the colonial gaze, it is done in such a way that it removes the local people from the frame, to present the landscape as empty. People in Africa are ephemeral in media production and even in what we call ecomedia today. In writing *African Ecomedia*, I wanted to bring them back into the frame. The exciting futuristic images in Chapter 5 titled *Shanty Megastructures* are important for centering Africans: as media makers, as knowledge producers, and as subjects of media production.

KIU-WAI CHU: Part of bringing Africans into the frame is also paying attention to local media production. This seems related to what you call "imperfect media." Could you expand on this concept? How are "imperfect media" related to fourth cinema? They are both low budget, smaller in scale, and environmentally much more sustainable. However, their social impact might be limited. How would you address this problem?

CAJETAN IHEKA: There is currently a cultural boom in Africa. There are young people in places like Lagos, Nigeria, who are doing remixes of major production. Working with basic equipment, they take samples of film and create new content out of them. I'm hoping that scholars going forward will pick up and will dig further into this more marginal production. "Imperfect media" are cultural artefacts with low carbon expenditure and are products of creative ingenuity and improvisation often seen in contexts of scarcity. We can call this form of media poor media. And yes, fourth cinema falls within the scope of "imperfect media" but this is not restricted to cinema. As I discuss in the book's epilogue, the scope extends to making art from recycled objects and cuts across media forms. I adapt "imperfect media" from Julio Garcia Espinosa's notion of "imperfect cinema," which names unpolished revolutionary cinema in the era of anticolonial struggle. "Imperfect media" updates the term for our current moment of climate catastrophe. In my usage, imperfect media embraces the more sustainable modes of media production that are cognizant of the planetary crisis. These works demonstrate the infinite resourcefulness that are necessary in our moment of finite resources. It is certainly a challenge to make such productions more visible. But it seems to me that addressing this challenge would involve our own reassessment of what constitutes a good film or art. In the age of digital media, those images have the potential

to circulate a lot. Young people are producing images and putting them on the Internet so that they can make their way to different audiences. Part of the problem is that they don't meet the conventional taste of what a good media is. When we begin to think in terms of sustainability, it opens room to appreciate transformative work that is not Hollywoodian in orientation. These productions are not peculiar to Africa; they appear in the Americas where Indigenous people are producing lifegiving media. What might be needed is to reassess our taste of what a proper media production is. It is our responsibility to reconfigure our taste, our pleasure principle in ways that allow us to appreciate the import of ecologically conscious media.

STEPHEN RUST: Film and media scholarship can preserve the memory of works that may otherwise disappear and be forgotten, particularly low budget productions. Even in Hollywood, films are barely preserved. It is well known that discs are wiped so that new films could be made. I wonder if we could ask you about the infrastructure of preservation and sustainability, the sustaining of media, how texts are sustained and stored so that they can be recirculated over time.

CAJETAN IHEKA: Storage and archiving are challenges for African media. Sometimes media scholars struggle to find a film from the 60s or 70s because of the problem of conservation. But digitality has created new pathways, with agencies and organizations funding depositories, archives of African transcripts. I haven't done much work on media conservation in the African context but the Internet, the digital sphere, with all its problems, is offering African media spaces of archiving. I agree that scholars by writing, discussing these media, are somehow encouraging their preservation. It is also interesting that cultural productions now function as archives for environments that are disappearing due to economic development in parts of Africa, due to mineral extraction. It is important to preserve these cultural forms but also to think of the way they are preserving something.

MIRIAM TOLA: Your book engages with scholarship of digital labor. Could you explain your contribution to these debates?

CAJETAN IHEKA: In considering this scholarship I realized that it tends to prioritize the digital sphere over the material. It is the glamourous work that happens on the Internet that gets most attention in discussions on digital labor. But the digital does not exist a vacuum, there is a material structure that makes possible working in the digital sphere. Part of my intervention is highlighting some of the material dimensions of digital labor. What happens when digital equipment becomes obsolete, how will it be replaced, how and where will it be disposed? To attend to the materiality of the digital, I focus on electronic waste pickers working in Agbogbloshie, Ghana (see Chapter 2). Is their work part of digital labor? Focusing on the recycling work of the metal pickers and the ecological pollution in this location, I argue that we cannot dissociate these dirty processes from the shiny part of digital labor. When we bring the material and immaterial together, we get a more realistic sense of digitality as it is in practice.

KIU-WAI CHU: This question is coming from my work with Chinese ecomedia. We often talk about China as a whole, but then there are important regional specificities that tend to be overlooked. The same is true with Africa. Do you see any significance in developing more regional approaches to African ecomedia, looking for instance to Nigerian ecomedia?

CAJETAN IHEKA: I think that there's room for that. The term African ecomedia is a useful categorical expression but the chapters in my book are grounded in specific localities. Of course, there is so much more that could be done. Based also on the work of young scholars that I am seeing, my sense is that in the future there will be more attention to the heterogeneity of African spaces in ecomedia studies, ecocriticism and the environmental humanities.

MIRIAM TOLA: Your book also focuses on race and the relations between Blackness and ecomedia. Do you see yourself in conversation with Armond Towns's book *On Black Media Philosophy*?

CAJETAN IHEKA: Part of what drives our projects is the concern with the ways in which Black people have been represented, misrepresented or marginalized from the media and how media philosophies and practices change when we put Black people at the center. In *African Ecomedia* (Chapter 2), I engage a question that the Kenyan farmer and activist Kisulu Musya asks in Julia Dahr's climate change film *Thank You for the Rain* (2017): "Why can't we be seen?" I think this is a shared concern but, in my case, African people and ecologies become central participants in media cultures, as producers, as subjects and as victims.

ANTONIO LÓPEZ: Where would you like to see the field of ecomedia go in the next future?

CAJETAN IHEKA: I would like to see more attention devoted to areas that so far haven't found much space in ecomedia and the environmental humanities. I hope that these fields will really expand and diversify in terms of geographies, topics and people being published. On a different note, I've been interested in ongoing discussions about the post-carbon world and I would like to ask: post-carbon for whom? What will happen in places such as the Niger Delta when we move into a post-carbon world? I hope we will pay attention to this question. Finally, I would like us to reach the point when media studies will address the materiality of *all* media and realize that *all* media practices have ecological consequences. When that happens, the descriptor eco- in ecomedia will become irrelevant. We are not there yet, but I think that this is the ultimate goal, and the hope that I have going forward.

Further Reading

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