



# ENVIRONMENTAL STORYTELLING SERIES OF CENTRAL NEW YORK

**Ecologies of Place with Artists**  
**Sayler/Morris**

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learning guide / spring 2024

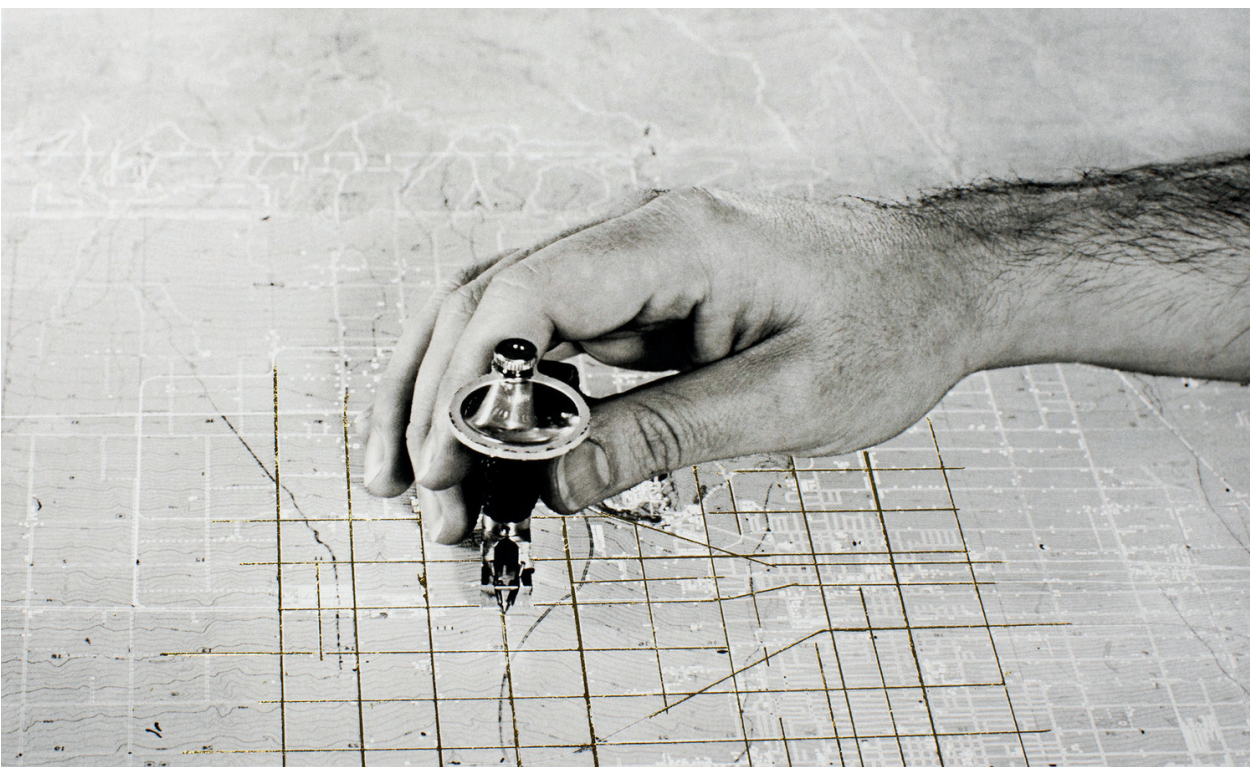


# UNDERSTANDING THE ENVIRONMENTAL STORY & ISSUE



**Ecologies of place** refers to the dynamic relationship between “nature” (birds, rivers, bacteria, etc.) and human communities (buildings, ideas, histories, gardens, etc.) that make up a specific place on the earth. This concept recognizes that a place is not just a physical location but a complex system where different components interact and influence each other. This can encompass the study of the local ecosystems, biodiversity, and the physical environment of a particular area, including understanding the flora, fauna, climate, geology, and other natural elements that shape the ecological dynamics of the place. It also incorporates the social, cultural, and economic aspects of a location, emphasizing the interconnectedness of these factors to recognize that changes in one aspect can have cascading effects throughout the entire system. Seeing the world in this way has profound impacts particularly on how we treat non-human beings- seeing them as collaborators in the construction and maintenance of place.

A single change in our shared environment can affect the dynamics of that place. For instance, local projects like Save the Rain change the physical landscapes of our streets - adding green infrastructure, enhancing tree trenches, and improving local water quality. These changes on a single street in Syracuse can create huge impacts on the natural environment, but also the ways it affects human psyches, interactions, and states of being. Ecologies of place ask us to take into account this complex web of connection and act from a feeling of care, because all care is in the end self-care.



# Guattari's *Three Ecologies*

The **Three Ecologies** framework of French philosopher and activist Félix Guattari can help us better understand this complex web of **natural, social, and mental** factors shaping humanity's well-being and the well-being of the planet struggling with the ongoing climate crisis. Guattari asserts that people seeking socio-ecological justice need to care about these three distinct, yet interrelated, realms of existence to make meaningful change. Injustices within any part of this system, such as those caused by overconsumption and waste, resound through all three ecologies.

Through this framework, an ecologies of place approach to environmental issues like climate induced water scarcity attends to natural systems, like the dramatic loss of biodiversity in lakes, rivers, and streams and their interconnected ecosystems; to social and economic systems that justify the construction of dams and pumps to extract and control flows of water; to historically marginalized communities that continue to suffer most from scarcity and contamination; and to reimaginings and rearrangings of human and non-human relationships that make up the places we share.





# KEY CONCEPT

## Exploring Ecologies of Place

*“Guattari’s concept of Three Ecologies really led to a seismic shift in our work. Prior to encountering these ideas, we understood our work as representing “Nature,” even if we understood to be a difficult, even impossible, task. After reading Guattari, we started to understand that what we take to be Nature (this static, sort of separate thing) was in fact a shifting set of relations, including what we often describe as culture and the history that shaped that culture. Guattari also helped us connect the activist and more contemplative strains of our work.” (Sayler/Morris)*

ESS featured storytellers Susannah Sayler and Edward Morris (Sayler/Morris) draw from the Three Ecologies framework to create multi-sensory and multi-perspectival stories to explore and encourage ecological awareness, attunement, and ethical action. In their photo project **Water, Gold, Soil (2014)**, they renegotiate the multiple meanings of the American River. Through large format photographs, Sayler/Morris reveal the river by its economic uses and reuses, rather than through expected scenic or idyllic virtues.

Instead of breathtaking images of river bends with tree lines and canyon ridges, the artists portray the pipelines, dams, and viaducts that manipulate the river for extractive human purposes. By highlighting the river as a resource for water, gold, and agriculture, Sayler/Morris show how extractive human intervention changed the river and the definition of place around it.



# STORYTELLER SPOTLIGHT: SAYLER/MORRIS



As a collaborative duo, Sayler/Morris work with a variety of media including photography, video, writing and installation to deepen engagement with natural and social ecologies. Their practice often focuses on visual studies of places that have both critical geographic and symbolic significance such as the American West and the Amazon rainforest. By playing on our expectations of what makes up a natural ecology, the duo asks us to consider the relational aspects of our environments.



In **Crystal Forest (2022)**, Sayler/Morris celebrate the complexity of the Amazon rainforest's ecology beyond the natural environment - using collage to explore the mental ecology of the Amazon, juxtaposing new and archival images atop photographs of the forest. One piece in the series combines photographs of the jungle reabsorbing an abandoned college building with 1960s/70s National Geographic photos. By collaging and overlaying photographs taken from different perspectives and times, the work asks viewers to create new connections between internal, social, and natural worlds. By looking to the forest for new ways of thinking, the artists celebrate the entwining of life, decay, and regeneration, and how living with a more holistic sense of place can, in turn, spark hope for better futures.



**“As a space, the Amazon is mosaic-like, loaded with symbolic meaning but also a real inhabited space. Representing this space was daunting and led us to develop new techniques in our work including collage, in which we layer different forms of space and life forms within the same image—portals.”**







# Social practice art as community collaboration

In addition to making physical artworks, Sayler/Morris engage in **social practice art**, a form of contemporary art that emphasizes collaboration and interaction between artists and communities or individuals. Much as their other projects do, Sayler/Morris' community-oriented work focuses on engaging ecologies of place, inviting members of the community to participate in the creation of the work, or building community as a form of art in and of itself. This work centers on creating more resilient communities and highlighting social ecologies of place. Sayler/Morris rely on historical context to underpin the importance of resilience in their place-based projects.

This framing of resilience is a crucial tool to help communities and systems better navigate and recover from the various impacts associated with climate change. Together we have the capacity and tools for resiliency through collectivity.

"There's the goal that we would contribute to the creation of a culture that can handle ecological issues and to contribute to the formation of a movement," said Morris in an interview. "Separate from that, is the goal of understanding what's going on with the environment. There's a philosophical inquiry that's personal, but there's also this public outreach goal."



An extension of this outreach goal includes the duo's **Toolshed** project, which gathers and distributes tools for living ecologically. The project profiles case studies of ecological innovators leading the way to changing our culture to center ecology. It necessitates that we understand the world, and our place in it, as interconnected, and make decisions for the benefit of the future beyond our present.

Toolshed acts locally in Hudson, NY, where there is a high density of people striving for ecological living in this area and a lot to learn from many case studies. Hudson-based projects include a tool lending library; a public library collection of books on the topic of ecology for readers of all ages and abilities; local workshops, events and projects that share knowledge and build community (ecosystem restoration project, mobile solar power station, workshops, and a DIY skatepark); and a team of people researching tools in four categories: food, kin, shelter, and magic. You can learn more about Toolshed through their online journal and Instagram account, where they regularly publish information about tools for living ecologically.

Sayler/Morris were jointly awarded the 2023 Guggenheim Fellowship in photography. Other fellowships and awards include the David Brower Center's Art / Act Award (2016), NYFA Artist Fellowship for Photography (2016), the Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship (2014) and the Loeb Fellowship at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design (2009). Their work has been exhibited in diverse venues from art museums to public spaces and interdisciplinary institutions such as science museums and history museums including MASS MoCA, the Kunsthal in Rotterdam, North Carolina Museum of Art, The Museum of Capitalism, The American Writers Museum, Thomas Cole National Historic Site, Harvard Museum of Natural History, Nevada Museum of Art, Everson Museum of Art, the Museum of Science and Industry.



# KEY TERMS



**Ecology:** study of interrelations (biological, social, economic) between organisms in their physical surroundings and the conditions in which they exist.

**Ecologies of place:** refers to the interconnected and dynamic relationships between the natural environment, human communities, and various elements that constitute a specific geographic location.

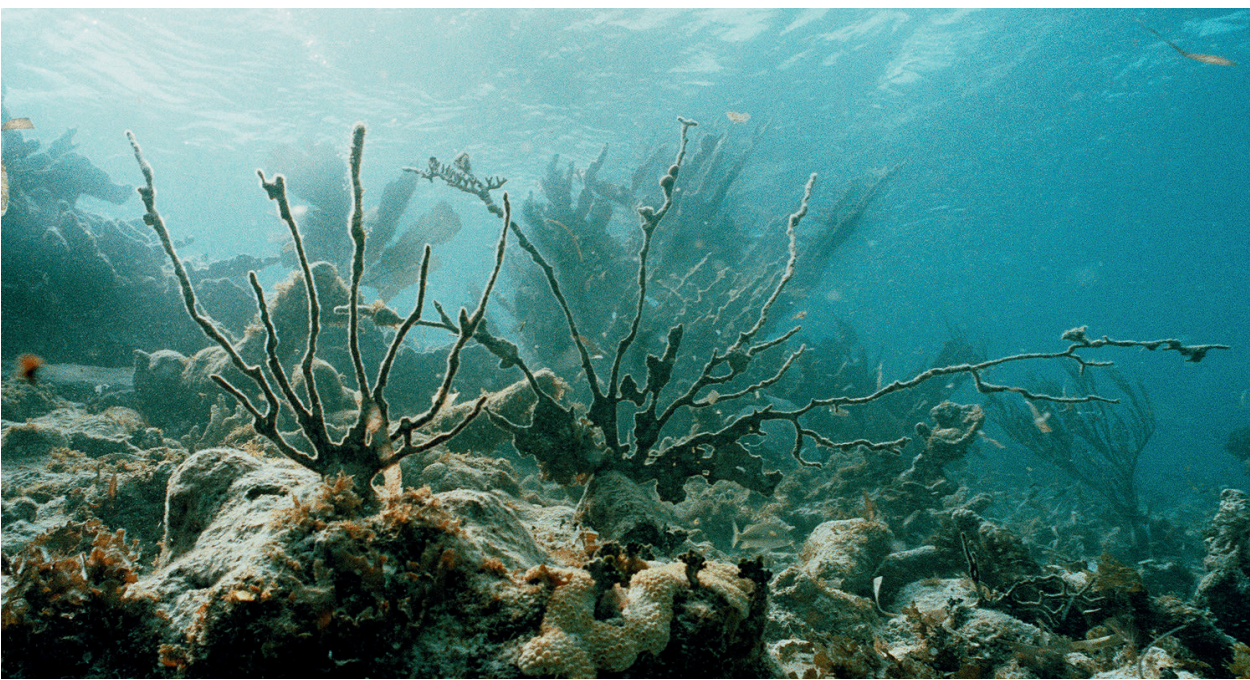
**Resilient communities:** refers to communities or ecosystems that possess the ability to withstand and recover from disturbances, shocks, or environmental changes. These communities exhibit robustness and adaptability in the face of challenges, maintaining essential functions and structures even when faced with disruptions.

Building and maintaining resilient communities are important goals in ecological conservation and sustainable environmental management.

**Social practice art:** a form of contemporary art that emphasizes collaboration and interaction between artists and communities or individuals. Unlike traditional art forms that may produce static objects for aesthetic contemplation, social practice art is concerned with engaging people in meaningful ways and addressing social issues.

**Relational:** how one thing relates to other things. Relational thinking is increasingly important as we consider the impact of human actions on the earth. Relational thinking is ecological thinking (thinking about systems and how nothing is ever independent).





# Guattari's *Three Ecologies*

**Three Ecologies:** philosophical framework by Edward Félix Guattari that emphasizes the entanglement of environmental, social, and mental factors in shaping our understanding of the interconnectedness of humanity's well-being and the well-being of the planet. Guattari suggested people seeking socio-ecological justice needed to care about these three distinct yet interrelated realms of existence to make meaningful change.

**Natural ecologies** concern the different ways living organisms relate to one another within the material world, encompassing the physical environment, ecosystems, and the various forms of life that inhabit the planet (geological, climate, vegetation, wildlife).

**Social ecologies** concern social relationships within human society, including political, economic, and cultural systems. They encompass issues of social justice, equality, and the distribution of resources.

**Mental ecologies** concern the interiority of a single person, including thoughts, desires, and emotions. These aspects of consciousness shape how people perceive and understand themselves and their relations to the places they occupy within diverse ecological flows.



# LEARNING MORE



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How does having an expansive perception of ecologies of place change your definition of home? What about family?

How would individual and community level perceptions of climate change differ if our natural surroundings were directly and consciously more a part of our own care and family networks?

What are some examples of resilience you have experienced in your life, whether environmental, social, or mental?

## STAY CONNECTED

You can find Sayler/Morris and learn more about their work online at their website [www.sayler-morris.com](http://www.sayler-morris.com) and Instagram @saylermorris.

## ACTIVITIES

Read on for activities and prompts that help engage the concept of "ecologies of place."



# Assembly Exhibition

*Assembly: Syracuse University Voices on Art and Ecology* is the Spring 2024 exhibition at the Syracuse University Art Museum. The exhibition features artwork from university alumni and faculty that aim to reshape our typical understandings of ecology. These works are being placed in conversation with other pieces from the museum's collection so as to demonstrate the evolution of our understanding around ecology from something pristine and distant to something close and interconnected to all of us.

In addition to this exhibition, the University Art Museum has also launched The Art, Ecology, and Climate Project. Similar to the Assembly Exhibit, the project aims to bring awareness and reshape our understanding around our current ecological crises. Led by Mike Goode (William P. Tolley Distinguished Professor of the Humanities) and Melissa Yuen (interim chief curator), and assisted by Jeffrey Adams (Ph.D student in English), Jeanelle Cho '24 (Architecture and Art History), and Abi Greenfield '25 (History and Political Philosophy), this project consists of fifteen online galleries (E-museums) that are each dedicated to a different ecological topic. Some of which include online galleries dedicated to The Anthropocene, Food Systems, and Pollution and Contamination.



SCAN ME

## *The Anthropocene: A Visual Analysis*

Visit the E-museum collection on The Anthropocene through the QR code above. Find a piece or a collection of pieces that speak to you.

Try your hand at the Visual Analysis section from The Art, Ecology, and Climate Project's E-museum teaching guide about The Anthropocene.

- How do the style and colors of this work factor into the way you're experiencing it as an image of grief or hope about the ecological phenomenon or human practice it depicts? How might a different style or a different color scheme for the exact same composition have contributed to a different affective experience?
- What decisions do you see the artist making about what to include and not to include in the picture frame? What about the angle or perspective they adopt in the image? How do these compositional choices contribute to the statement you see the artwork making (or failing to make) about the kinds of planetary harm it depicts? Specific to photographs, what elements of the image appear to be beyond the photographer's control? To what extent (or in what ways) is the subject of the photograph its author?
- How do the figures matter to how you are interpreting this artwork's ecological project or significance? What about the ground or background? The relation between the two? In the case of works that have multiple figures, what different functions do these figures serve? Or what different relational vectors to other figures, or to their surroundings, do they establish?





## *Writing Prompts*

Imagine you are creating an E-museum to be included in The Art, Ecology, and Climate Project. What ecological idea, topic, or issue would you underscore? How would you express your thoughts artistically? What mediums would you use? What would you want people to think of when they saw it? How would you want them to feel?

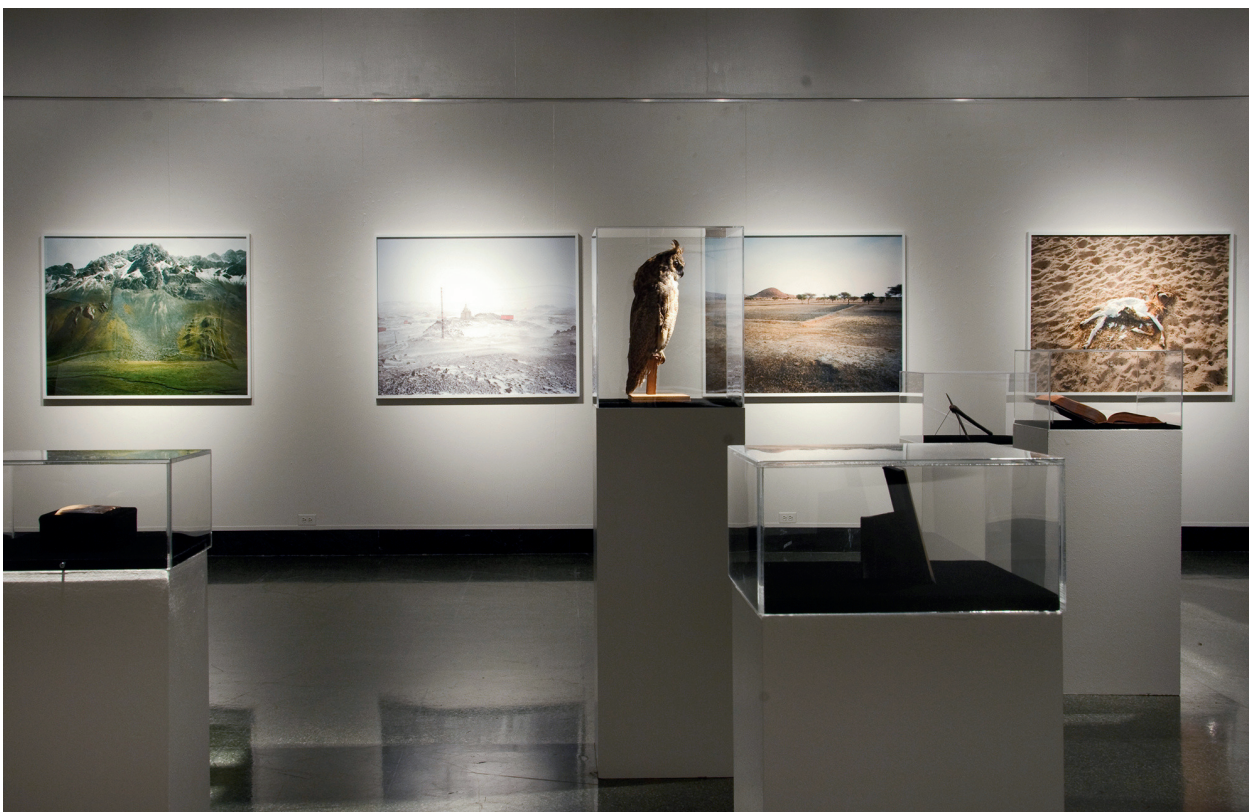
### **Ekphrastic Response**

Ekphrastic poetry is a poetic response to a piece of artwork. Explore the Assembly exhibition or the E-museum. Find a piece that sparks your curiosity and wonder.

### **Creative Writing Prompt**

Your chosen piece can be a springboard for your creative response. You can start by describing the physical details of the art object - what colors and images do you see? You can then move into memory and connections. What does the piece remind you of? What does it make you think about or remember?





Sayler/Morris also engage pre-existing institutional collections through curatorial projects that challenge and expand written histories. Curatorial work within archives can reveal previously unseen facets of the “ecologies of place” where people live and work each day. By drawing attention to a broader ecological context as part of a more-than-human world, Sayler/Morris’ projects *Next of Kin* (2017), *Terminus* (2009), and *Assembly* (2024) facilitate reflection and dialogue that encourages viewers to appreciate the diverse ecological worlds in which we live. Accessible in the Joe and Emily Lowe Galleries until May 12, 2024, this collection uses art created by Syracuse University faculty and recent alumni seeking to articulate novel approaches to environmental understanding.

In each instance, these projects draw attention to the ecologies of place by contesting the narratives commonly attached to museums and archives as detached from our lives, showing methods for calling upon their contents as we work to see the world anew. In re-storying our environments, Sayler/Morris invite us to wrestle with how best we might better inhabit the various more-than-human places we call home.

Read on to learn more about specific projects.





### **Gouwane (2013)**

Part of a larger workshop entitled Fieldnotes from Gowanus, the film Gouwane explores the Gowanus Canal (Brooklyn, NY) as a site transformed by, but also beyond, human intervention, where ecologies of place intertwine. In a world experiencing the effects of climate change, Sayler/Morris explore how the Gowanus Canal can become a neighborhood site of understanding in light of climate change. The Gowanus floods with increasing frequency and intensity; the film mirrors an emerging awareness of how our human actions—and inactions—effect change that often goes ignored until it encroaches upon our world. Sayler/Morris showcase ecologies of place in motion, inseparably interacting on a hyper-local level.

### **Canary Project (2006-2020)**

The Canary Project developed research-based art and media focused on ecology as a response to climate change. During its lifespan, it fostered the creation of twenty projects with the help of hundreds of collaborators, attempting to increase public awareness of ecological issues ranging from the extinction of species, to food security, to gambling. As one such project, Sayler/Morris started the Canary Lab at Syracuse University within the College of Visual and Performing Arts.

The lab hosts courses for students and a variety of programming related to ecological issues and the meeting of different perspectives. It foregrounds ecological thinking as it results from a collaborative process.

The project ended in 2020, with Sayler/Morris citing the need to transition from informative to active projects in response to present-day realities of climate change. They launched Toolshed the same year, a project that is both pedagogical and active at the community level.

### **Rivers Tongue (2023-Present)**

Sayler/Morris were awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship in Photography in 2023. Their upcoming project, tentatively titled Rivers Tongue, focuses on the cultural, spiritual, and ecological significance of the Hudson River, also known by the Mohican tribe as the Mahikannituk, meaning “water that flows both ways.”

You can find Sayler/Morris and learn more about their work online at their website and Instagram.



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Diversity and Equity; Write  
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Sciences

*The Environmental  
Storytelling Series of CNY is  
Coordinated by Syracuse  
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SUNY ESF's Writing, Rhetoric,  
and Communications  
Program*

