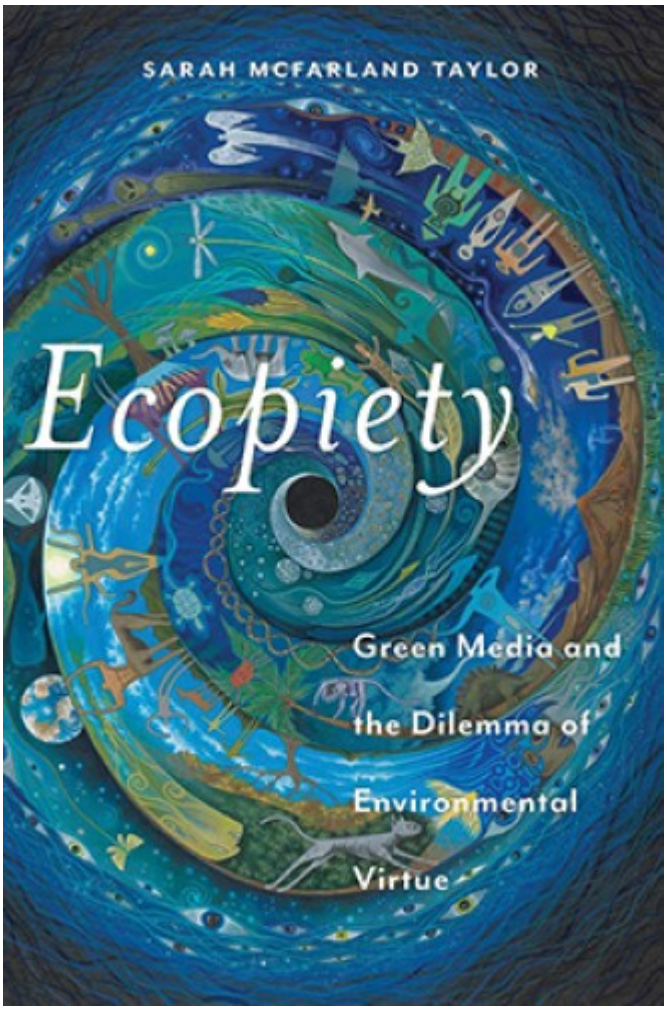
What is ecopiety?

The stories we tell about consuming our way to a healthy environment

by Jacob J. Erickson in the June 17, 2020 issue

In Review



Ecopiety

Green Media and the Dilemma of Environmental Virtue

By Sarah McFarland Taylor
New York University Press

My students increasingly express a deep weariness as they navigate their responses in the wake of climate injustice. As scientific facts multiply and historical injustices compound, litanies of loss weigh down people's spirits. Our theological and moral dwellings are buried, it seems, and many feel too burdened to do the work of creatively transforming them. Stuck in that rut, what change could any of us conjure into the world, anyway?

The flip side of this exhaustion is an enlarged sense of moral responsibility for our effects on this planet. We think and act with growing awareness about food waste, water scarcity, and our animal and plant kin. We try to be conscious shoppers and watch our carbon footprints. Sometimes we feel pretty good about those choices. But it's easy to feel like we're wandering in a wilderness of stories, ads, and advice—not quite certain if we're heading in the right direction.

Sarah McFarland Taylor wades into this messy space of felt eco-practice with wry humor and thorough clarity. Her writing helpfully names and explores the contemporary reality of what she calls ecopiety, "contemporary practices of environmental (or 'green') virtue, through daily, voluntary works of duty and obligation—from recycling drink containers and reducing packaging to taking shorter showers and purchasing green products." A pervasive sense of ecopiety, she observes, focuses on individual ecological virtues and vices, convincing us that the best way to transform our current planetary challenges is through our own daily, "green" actions.

The power of this book rests in the compelling and innovative sources McFarland Taylor explores to understand how individualistic forms of ecopiety are *storied* to us. From the images of green business found in the popular novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* to the moral status of Prius drivers, from vegetarian vampires to the marketing of green burials to ecojustice-themed hip-hop or tattooing, each chapter uncovers the media and messaging that make subtle, sometimes imperceptible interventions in our ecological ethics and the fundamental ways we understand our living.

Ecopiety's rich dives into these pop culture texts are no passing fancy on the part of its author. McFarland Taylor, a scholar of religion, completed a new graduate degree in media studies in order to weave together multiple disciplines at a level that's

rarely seen. Her command of various theories and skillful prose make the book at once academic and accessible to a larger audience.

McFarland Taylor makes visible to her readers the ordinary and complex ways religious or ethical stories reach us in the everyday. These stories are “performed and enacted through cultural practices and technologies, inscribed into bodies, architecture, art, rugs, pots, fashion, rituals, ceremonies, games, computer software applications, and myriad cultural works that do the storytelling for us.” Starting with everyday practices, Ecopiety points us toward the very serious way the media we encounter embody and transform our own sense of living. The material stuff of culture matters; it intervenes in our stories about living well on this planet.

Perhaps the book’s most important contribution is McFarland Taylor’s uncovering of a “story problem” that many of us have when it comes to environmental ethics. In capitalism, ecological piety is construed almost exclusively through consumption. Being ecologically virtuous becomes more about what individuals buy than anything else. McFarland Taylor calls this form of ecopiety *consumopiety*. Consumopiety is marketed to us to make us feel better about our own living, give us a sense that we’re really making an earthly difference, and encourage us to spend our money on consumable goods (green though they may be). It convinces us that we might have some power in an overwhelming situation.

Positing individual consumption as an empowering solution to a structural problem is ultimately self-defeating, McFarland Taylor argues. “Marketing consumopiety has become a tactic for large, corporate retailers to neuter, depoliticize, and co-opt what had begun as a countercultural movement.” We need to “re-story” our ecological ethics toward the work of reconnecting with others, thinking about politics, seeking structural transformation, and embodying resistance. “What it would take,” she writes, “is a reorientation of environmental messaging away from the notion that every tiny act counts and toward an unapologetic emphasis on broad-scale policy enactments and serious public investment.” The task is urgent, wide-scale, and, perhaps, daunting.

The book uncovers some instances of the reorientation of our environmental messaging (in eco-just hip-hop, for example). It doesn’t offer a road map to show what such reorientation fully looks like. That kind of practical approach is beyond the book’s well-defined scope.

But by the end of the book it’s clear that McFarland Taylor’s witty prose has been performing such a way from the start. She concludes by suggesting that playful creativity seriously matters for the stories we tell. Communal play evokes a desire in us for interrogation, adaptability, and change. We might play with messaging for the sake of connection, play with our uncertainty in the moment for the sake of the future, playfully subvert political expectations, or creatively rescript old media for the sake of a planetary future. There’s something of a holy foolishness here, but holy fools have a long track record of pointing out good possibilities in the midst of dead ends, subverting emperors without clothes, and making unexpected alliances. If that’s foolish, it’s a part I’m willing to play.