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"Citizen Sensing with Soil, and the Intimate Alterity of Narrative Distance"

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New forms of ecological citizenship are emerging. As people wake up to an ecologically damaged world, while simultaneously experiencing the unsteady ground from which to imagine such a world, they start to take up low-cost technology to speculatively sense our surrounding ecologies. This article brings together narrative theory and environmental humanities while close-reading such a citizen sensing practice, that of Sounding Soil (2017–now). At stake in this sensing project is the elemental alterity of soil ecology that helps us to focalize a clear narrative distance between human voice and non-human mood. Going outside the analytical contours of normative environmental discourse and the ecocritical tradition, this article argues for the critical importance of narrative distance in sensing an ecology, because it subverts a logic of rendering the elemental as commensurable. How we pursue citizen sensing practices, therefore, is always premised on embodied, immersive, and discursively syncretic modes of speculative meaning-making: a sometimes uncomfortable but always critically improvisational engagement with elemental emergence. The dialectical tension between intimate sensing and narrative distance in Sounding Soil is no paradoxical story: it instead formalizes planetary narratives in which the ecology of soil materializes as a figure of alterity, not reducible to human voice. (Abstract)

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