

# Anglophone Literature and Culture in the Anthropocene



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Edited by

Gina Comos and Caroline Rosenthal

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This essay collection is based on a lecture series entitled “Narratives of Crisis: Anglophone Literature and Culture in the Anthropocene” organized by Caroline Rosenthal at Friedrich Schiller University, Jena, in the summer term of 2017. The talks turned out to be of such high academic quality and innovative potential and led to such stimulating and fruitful discussions afterwards that we decided to turn them into a collection of essays. Gina Comos, who is at present finishing her dissertation on “Women and Nature in U.S.-American Literature of the Anthropocene” with professor Rosenthal, joined her as editor. Some of the contributors in the present volume gave talks within the lecture series while others were invited to contribute to the essay collection to complete the picture, especially in the case of the last part on media.

Making books is part of life, and when about two thirds of the essays had come in and been edited, Gina gave birth to her second child and went on her well-deserved maternity leave. Florian Wagner, who is a contributor to the volume himself and who just started his PhD thesis with the working title “Revisiting the Environmental Imagination: Making Place and the Necessity of Reinhabitation in North American Literature and Culture” with professor Rosenthal, stepped in for Gina. It is thanks to his diligent proof-reading, formatting, and attention to a plethora of details that the book could appear in time.

# INTRODUCTION

GINA COMOS AND CAROLINE ROSENTHAL

Set against the collective story about humanity's geomorphic impacts that will be legible in the earth's geophysical systems for millennia to come is the story of the human species, a much more fractured narrative. (Nixon 2014)

In 2000, the Nobel Prize-winning chemist Paul Crutzen and marine-science specialist Eugene Stoermer coined the term “Anthropocene” (roughly translated as “the Age of Humans”), based on the idea that human activities have altered the earth's ecology and geology in such unprecedented ways that it becomes necessary to proclaim a new geological epoch superseding the current Holocene. The Anthropocene Working Group, an advisory body of international scientists and humanists set up by the International Commission on Stratigraphy in 2009, recently issued recommendations for formalizing the Anthropocene proposing the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as a defining boundary as it coincides with the beginning of the nuclear age and the “Great Acceleration.”

As the concept has been gaining ground over the last two decades, it has moved beyond the realm of science and academia, and has found its way into public discourse. Thanks to the media and popular science communication, it has not only been addressed in a number of renowned journals and newspapers, such as *DIE ZEIT*, *The Economist*, and *The Guardian*, but has also become a recurring subject of public art projects and museum exhibitions. In Germany the *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* in Berlin, e.g., organized an international and transdisciplinary “Anthropocene Project” (2013-2014) featuring lectures, conferences, art exhibitions, and video installations and the German Museum in Munich held a special exhibition under the headline “Welcome to the Anthropocene: The Earth in Our Hands” (2014-2016). Examples like these demonstrate the growing proliferation and impressive reach of the originally scientific concept. The rise of this “public Anthropocene”—as Rob Nixon has fittingly called it (2014)—can be understood as a response to one of the most pressing issues of our time, i.e. the need to renegotiate the complex relationship between humans and nonhuman nature: What does it actually *mean* when humans

become geological agents? And how does this paradigm shift alter our notions of human history, traditional narratives and aesthetics, as well as our ethical responsibilities?

The idea that humans have turned into a collective geological force shakes our epistemological foundations. If in the Anthropocene the nature/culture dichotomy is becoming increasingly blurred, we need to reconsider our division between natural and human history as well as our notions of the subject and of human agency since the Enlightenment. According to historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, whose essay “The Climate of History: Four Theses” (2009) has become a fundamental reference point in the Anthropocene discourse, we must acknowledge the deep history of humanity and perceive of ourselves as a *species* which has, collectively and unintentionally, driven earth into a new, human-dominated geological epoch. On the one hand, this view concurs with the popular assumption that thinking and acting as a collective is a necessary precondition for alleviating the negative effects of climate change and other anthropogenic impacts on the environment—an idea which is reflected in recent articulations of humanity’s role as stewards (Crutzen and Schwägerl 2011) or gardeners (Marris 2014) of the earth. On the other hand, the species perspective implicit in the Anthropocene narrative has also been met with vehement criticism for a number of reasons.

One point of criticism levelled against the term Anthropocene is that it may rekindle Enlightenment anthropocentrism by assigning humankind the role of masters of the world, hence endorsing human aggrandizement and hubris. Naming a new geological epoch after the human species, however, does not intend to glorify human agency and human domination of nature (Jamieson 2017: 14). On the contrary, the proponents of the concept argue that seeing humans as active constituents and integral parts of the environment—and not simply as an outside force—increases our responsibility towards the planet and an awareness for the consequences of destroying habitats, driving other species to extinction, and changing the climate. In positive terms, the Anthropocene may thus carry the potential to evoke new humility towards both human and nonhuman life forms. Either way, it forces us to redefine our relationship with the planet and to find a new ethics for living and acting in a world largely shaped by us.<sup>1</sup>

Other critical voices come from the fields of postcolonial studies and environmental justice studies, which challenge the anthropocentric notion that “we’re all in this together.” Shifting the focus towards the uneven

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the concepts of hubris and humility in the history of environmentalism, and on current revisions of these concepts, see “Hubris and Humility in Environmental Thought” (2017) by Michelle Niemann.

distribution of responsibility and vulnerability, they emphasize the dominant role that Western, industrialized countries have played in remaking the planet, pointing out that those who have contributed least to greenhouse gas emissions are likely to suffer most from its effects. From this perspective, the narrative of the Anthropocene as a manifestation of collective human agency and responsibility is both one-sided and incomplete (Nixon 2014). Questions of inequality, vulnerability, and justice therefore need to be taken into greater consideration in the Anthropocene discourse.

New books on cultural and literary responses to the Anthropocene have appeared by the dozen in recent years but the role that different cultural imaginaries and divergent postcolonial histories have played in shaping responses to the challenges of the Anthropocene has not yet been sufficiently addressed. This volume wants to contribute to filling this gap by tracing the particularities of literature and culture of the Anthropocene in Anglophone post-settler societies, with a focus on US-American, Canadian, and Australian perspectives. The selected essays offer reflections upon the ways that cultural frameworks (i.e. culture-specific beliefs, myths, values, semiotics, and ethics) inform conceptualizations and representations of the currently changing human-nature relationship. While Great Britain is the absent centre in our probing of Anglophone literature and media responses such as film and photography to the new geological epoch of the Anthropocene, contributions from the fields of postcolonial and indigenous studies highlight the cultural and historical preconditions that shape different understandings of and creative responses to the current environmental crisis. By asking which role colonialism has played in establishing an anthropocentric worldview and in the destruction of local and global environments, they assess what we can learn from indigenous perspectives and traditional knowledges of nature, thus offering a more diversified reading of the Anthropocene concept.

Due to the large temporal and spatial scales of humanity's impact on the Earth system, the new concept poses significant challenges of representation for writers, artists, photographers, and others involved in cultural production. The risks of the Anthropocene—human-induced environmental threats like air and water pollution, soil salinization, ocean acidification, permafrost thawing, biodiversity loss, plastic pollution, radioactive contamination, and others—are highly complex and intangible; they evolve gradually and for the most part remain unseen, leading to what postcolonial critic Rob Nixon has called “slow violence” in his eponymous book in 2011. As one of the most pressing challenges of our times, anthropogenic climate change, for instance, is neither limited to one particular region nor is it

visible and comprehensible in its dramatic far-reaching, long-term, and unforeseeable consequences for global ecosystems as well as the human population. In addition, there are no clearly identifiable perpetrators and victims. Given its intangibility and invisibility, climate change is widely perceived as an abstract phenomenon by the general public, a distant threat of little or no personal relevance.

Ecocritical studies focusing on the relationship between literature and the environment show that narratives engage our intellect and emotions in very particular ways and stress the particular importance of storytelling in mediating climate change and other current global risks (Weik von Mossner 2016: 84-85). By creating “imaginative counterworlds,” literature and other forms of art may not only help make the risks of the Anthropocene more tangible and comprehensible to the individual, but they function as an important catalyst to critical self-reflection and ecological awareness, as e.g. Hubert Zapf argues in his contribution to this essay collection. Likewise, the study of ecologically oriented works opens a valuable space for discussions focusing on the social and ethical challenges, as well as the narrative and aesthetic dimensions of the new epoch.

One of the topics discussed in the following essays is the dependence on and cultural significance of certain genres and modes (such as pastoral, apocalypse, and elegy) for conceptualizations of the shifting human-nature relationship. Special attention is hereby paid to the concepts of nature and modes of thinking inherited from the Old World—traditions which have not only influenced the representations of newly-encountered environments to a high degree, but which have also been changed and adapted as a consequence of direct encounters with local realities. While European Romanticism, for instance, had far-reaching implications for the settlers’ imagination of American wilderness in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, writers such as Henry David Thoreau developed a distinctive American tradition of nature writing in which Romantic ideas and aesthetic categories (e.g. the sublime) were blended with nationalist trends celebrating wilderness as a cultural resource and a source of national pride for America. In light of the Anthropocene, however, literary traditions and ecocritical theories that rely on a clear separation between nature and culture and on conceptualizations of humanity’s pristine Other have become largely obsolete. This raises the question how the concept of the Anthropocene allows us to reread earlier texts of the national canon and how it has altered the canon of environmental literature, which has long been dominated by traditional nature writing.

This volume above all wants to investigate how writers and artists deal with the abovementioned challenges to grasp and to represent the magnitude of environmental destruction in and the risks of the Anthropocene. The

selected essays emphasize the potential fictional and non-fictional texts have in picturing these risks and in making them comprehensible and the role they play in heightening public environmental awareness. They also look at how the narrative of the Anthropocene is constructed and reconstructed as well as embedded in diverse national literatures, mythologies, and distinct medial formats. There is not one narrative of the Anthropocene but many, just as there is not one nature but a plurality of natures, constructed in individual national contexts and colonial histories. The essays in this volume hence address what influence current paradigm shifts relating to nature and culture have on national symbols and cultural icons, particularly on the American West, the Canadian North, and the Australian Outback. Conversely, they analyse US-American, Canadian, and Australian literary and medial responses to discourses of the Anthropocene and ask to what extent indigenous and posthuman perspectives challenge the common species claim in these discourses. By embracing an array of perspectives and culture-specific responses to the complex ontological, representational, and ethical questions that arise with the advent of the Anthropocene, the contributions of this collection situate the new concept in distinct epistemological frameworks and ultimately call into question the universality of the Anthropocene narrative.

The first section explores the narrative forms of the Anthropocene and the role literature has played in raising environmental awareness. Hubert Zapf's "The Challenge of the Anthropocene and the Sustainability of Texts" fundamentally reframes the relationship between environmentalism and literature in what he calls cultural ecology. Cultural ecology brings different genres, periods, and epistemic models into dialog about their contributions to ecocultural knowledge. Anthropocene literature, Zapf argues, continues and discontinues literary history. It reinterprets archives of cultural memory, such as literature, by re-reading earlier texts of nature writing, Romanticism, or exploration, thus drawing on and questioning nature-culture or human-nonhuman paradigms which have shaped our understanding of and relation to our environment. In his essay, Zapf claims that the Anthropocene "presupposes both the merging and the differentiation between human and nonhuman agency" and argues for an "ecological culture-nature relationship as an interrelated polarity" (4) instead of a radical cultural constructivism which once again reduces nature to the nonhuman Other. Zapf regards literature as a vital element in this ongoing negotiation. Literature is a "sustainable source of the cultural imagination" (13) as it memorizes human-nature interactions of the past and at the same time imagines future (counter) scenarios. For an understanding of texts as sustainable texts not their specific political agenda of environmentalism is important but the

“functional potential of their own evolved forms and aesthetic procedures” (16). The relation of literature and sustainability thus involves a double ambiguity: we need the past to understand the future but we also need fresh beginnings. Art and literature are playing fields for both; they are archives of knowledge of the past and they can envision solutions and evolutions for the future of human-nonhuman relations.

In “Narratives of the Anthropocene in Interdisciplinary Perspective” Gabriele Dürbeck reflects upon the malleable narrative structure of the Anthropocene concept and on how the Anthropocene narrative is framed in various discourses. Depending on which beginning is chosen for the period and on which role is assigned to humanity, the Anthropocene assumes different narrative forms within the meta-narrative of the Anthropocene. These narratives, Dürbeck cogently argues, are marked by protagonists, a plot as well as a spatial-temporal structure and serve different goals. Narrative is defined with reference to Koschorke and Assmann as a “collective consciousness” (Koschorke 2012: 24) which gives form and meaning to “actions, political goals, historical images and human experiences” (Assmann 2016: 46). Dürbeck identifies five narrative patterns: 1. the disaster or apocalypse narrative, which portrays a dark and gloomy future as natural resources shrink and species become extinct, serves a precautionary function. 2. the court narrative raises issues of agency and responsibility as it deals with questions of causation and liability. 3. the narrative of the great transformation presumes that the global environmental crisis is still manageable and that its effects can be minimized by local and bottom-up action that complements centralized measures. 4. the (bio-) technological narrative in contrast relies on large-scale interventions into the earth system such as geo-engineering. 5. the interdependency narrative in which nature is no longer perceived as other and humans as superior but which instead proposes the interaction of human and nonhuman agents. Each of these five narrative renditions of the Anthropocene reflects different epistemologies and articulates “rather divergent political, economic, ethical, and anthropological values and interests and outline[s] often opposing practical orientations” (37).

Section two of the volume turns to the United States which the historian Perry Miller once called “nature’s nation” (1967) because the making of the American nation, its mythology, literary canon, and self-conceptualization, are so deeply and inextricably intertwined with the construction of nature and wilderness. Ecocriticism arose in the United States and, to many other countries’ justified distress, for a long time has been defined in US-American terms that were then purported to be global and universal. In “American Ecocriticism and the Literature of the Anthropocene” Gina

Comos hence looks at how the concept of the Anthropocene has changed the field of American ecocriticism. She starts out by examining in general the impact which the cultural crisis arising from the Anthropocene has had on the humanities and on literary theory. Comos claims that since the advent of the Anthropocene, American ecocriticism has moved away from an idea of nature as pristine to a more complex understanding of nature. Taking her departure from William Cronen's seminal essay "The Trouble with Wilderness," she shows that second wave ecocriticism questions the resolute distinction between humans and nature on which earlier definitions of wilderness rest. Instead recent ecocriticism dwells on the interrelation between nature and humans and, in light of globalization, embraces what Ursula Heise has called "eco-cosmopolitanism" as a sense of planetary rather than local belonging. Another shift Comos diagnoses is that ecocriticism has moved away from an ecocentric towards a sociocentric stance which not only reverses an anthropocentric perspective but includes questions of environmental (in)justice and (in)equity. The second part of the contribution gives a sound overview of new developments in literature triggered by the Anthropocene. Comos looks at how the canon has broadened by including new genres, such as science fiction or cli-fi—a genre that since its emergence in the 1980s has significantly evolved. She also comments on new strategies of representation that have developed as a response to the intangibility of climate change—for instance that nonhuman entities now often shape narrative in literature which is no longer "solely character-driven" (Trexler 2015: 26).

In "Climate, the Anthropocene, and the Early American Republic," Catrin Gersdorf uses the Anthropocene as an epistemological framework for investigating the role discourses on climate played in the political ecology of the early American republic. Tropes of soil, heat, and climate in 18<sup>th</sup>-century America, Gersdorf cogently argues, "buoyed articulations of identifiably *American* forms of human agency" (68) that ultimately contributed to global environmental change in the Anthropocene. The author starts out by looking at Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835/1840) to show how rhetoric on climate change not only distinguished America from Europe but became instrumental in turning America into a cultural agent and a geological force at the same time. Such anthropocenic discourses are especially prominent in Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) in which he parallels the mastery of the natural environment by the early settlers with America's strength and superiority to Europe. Jefferson's text fuses colonization and discourses on climate and is anthropocenic *avant la lettre* in that it stresses human agency in climate change. Gersdorf's essay minutely shows how in the early

American Republic, rhetoric on the greatness, exceptionality, and promising potential of the young nation was underlined by America's role in "creating" and changing the environment and climatic conditions in America.

The last contribution in this section is by Florian Wagner. His essay "Towards the Reinhabitation of the Soil: On Becoming Earthbound in Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island*" looks at how the capitalist system is intertwined with the global environmental crisis. Capitalism, Wagner argues, not only exploits nature as a cheap resource but creates a binary opposition between nature and society/culture which posits economic growth and ecological sustainability on opposite ends of a scale, thus defying alternative political visions for how humans and nonhumans could live on the planet. Referring to the theories of Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway and their ideas of "worlding" and "being earthbound," Wagner shows how such binary thinking can be abandoned in favor of the idea of multiplicity as, for instance, developed by Hardt and Negri. Before probing these concepts for their potential to produce alternatives to capitalism, however, Wagner re-examines Karl Marx's theory of alienation, particularly Marx's notion of "species-being," which explicates how capitalism dehumanizes human beings and estranges them from their environment. Last but not least, in the final part of his essay, Wagner addresses Gary Snyder's seminal volume of poetry *Turtle Island*. Snyder's poetry allows for imagining a space outside the capitalist system in which it becomes "possible to reimagine the relationship of human beings and the natural world" (89). In its archaic outlook Snyder's poetry points to an "universal interconnectedness" (93) that makes it possible to become earthbound, not in a romanticized return to pre-capitalist times but as a future vision for reclaiming one's place in the world.

The third section focuses on Canada as a nation that at first sight seems to share many things with its southern North American neighbour but vastly and significantly differs from the U.S. in its semiotization of space, its national mythology, and the subject's relationship to the land, as Caroline Rosenthal emphasizes in her contribution "The Nature(s) of Ecocriticism and Ecopoetry in Canada," which examines the origins, development, and characteristics of a genuinely Canadian ecocriticism. While purportedly universal, global definitions of ecocriticism often turn out to be centred on and defined by the U.S., Rosenthal shows that Canada's postcolonial legacy, its specifics of nation-building, and its semiotization of space have led to a distinctly Canadian ecocriticism. Canadian literature and culture from the start have been characterized by a certain unease about location and place. Unlike the US, Canada has had no ideology of a manifest destiny or a New Eden; rather, the subject felt overwhelmed by a vast and often hostile

environment. Both Northrop Frye's metaphor of the "garrison mentality" and Margaret Atwood's claim that "survival" is the characteristic theme of early Canadian literature reflect that Canadian criticism has been informed by the troubled and fraught relationship between subject and the environment. Many critics have hence rightly argued that in a broad understanding of the term Canadian literature has always been ecocritical. Recent developments however, as Rosenthal shows by closely looking at ecopoetry in Canada, indicate a shift from the monstrous, terrifying, and awe-inspiring aspects of nature towards an attitude of care. Rosenthal exemplifies this by examining the concepts of "home-making" and of "poetic attention" in the poetics of Don McKay which reflect a mediated relationship towards nature and demonstrate an attitude of care that nonetheless respects the otherness and wilderness of nature.

In her article "Indigenous Literature and the Anthropocene: Two Case Studies" Hanna Straß-Senol explores the Anthropocene's tenet that humans are geophysical agents from an indigenous perspective and in the context of postcolonialism. She critically re-examines, for instance, the species category in Anthropocene discourses because it glosses over "intraspecies inequalities" (Malm and Hornborg 2014: 62). While the common species claim in Anthropocene discourses purports humanity's shared fate and aims, Straß-Senol cogently shows that the Anthropocene "is rooted in highly inequitable and forceful global processes of technological and industrial development" (119). Instead of seeing it as an entirely new phenomenon, Straß-Senol argues that the Anthropocene is a continuation of colonial practices of dispossession and pleads for an inclusion of indigenous knowledges to decolonize discourses on the Anthropocene. Her article presents two literary case studies on this, Chantal Bilodeau's play *Sila* (2015) and Thomas King's Governor General award-winning novel *The Back of the Turtle* (2014), which re-frame the Anthropocene narrative by focusing on a holistic worldview. Bilodeau's play is set in Iqaluit and intertwines the devastating effects global warming has on an Inuit community in the Arctic with Inuit mythology, thus showing how a once naturally but also spiritually "rich and storied landscape" is turned into a "barren landscape" (131). Thomas King's novel in a similar vein connects the creation myth of turtle to Canadian petrocapiatalism in his depiction of a fictive environmental catastrophe in which an herbicide called GreenSweep kills the turtles on the Smoke River Reserve depriving the indigenous people of their main source of income, turtle tourism. Both texts, Straß-Senol convincingly shows, can be read as decolonizing interventions that understand Anthropocene discourses as a continuation of white settler colonialism.

Dunja Mohr in her contribution “Anthropocene Matters: Stories of Entanglement” looks at how aesthetic imagination stimulates affective responses in the reader and hence makes real and palpable the otherwise intangible effects of the Anthropocene. Speculative fiction in particular probes conceptions of the human self by opening up reflective spaces which allow us to rethink ethical choices we make in relating to the environment in particular ways. Such an educational literary approach can lead to a “resetting of deep cognitive structures (schemas)” (139). Anthropocene fiction, Mohr argues, “engages readers in the imaginative experience of the cataclysmic results of a changed planet” (140). However, not only the subject matter of Anthropocene fiction differs from earlier forms of narrative, but the means and manners of representation so that genres, e.g. that of utopia, take on new forms. Mohr exemplifies those changes by looking at two novels, Michael Murphy’s *A Description of the Blazing World* (2011), which personalizes the apocalypse, and Ronald Wright’s time-travel story *A Scientific Romance* (1997). Both texts set up a dialogue with classic texts of the British canon—Wright’s text revisits H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895) and Murphy’s novel references Margaret Cavendish’s 17<sup>th</sup>-century utopian novella *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World*. In their examination of objects of civilization both narratives employ an archaeological approach and argue for a resignification of human-object relations. Set in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Toronto, Murphy’s novel deals with the junk of civilization that clutters up the protagonist’s life so that objects start acting upon him and demand undue attention. Wright’s novel, set in the 26<sup>th</sup> century, deals with the rubble of objects a now extinct civilization has left behind. Both texts summon their readers to rethink human-object relations and our entanglement with things.

Last, but most certainly not least, in the volume’s fourth section, Australia is examined as it is here that divergences between nature perceptions brought from the motherland England differ most significantly from the environment settlers encountered on the new continent. Kylie Crane in “Anthropocene and the End of the World: Apocalypse, Dystopia, and Other Disasters” explores fictional depictions of diverse apocalypses in Australian literature which all show how the effects of settlement and colonization in Australia are continued in our present age. Her first case study deals with Colin Johnson/Mudrooroo’s *Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1989). While the novel does not explicate an environmental disaster it does show that for indigenous people, the Anthropocene began with colonization. The apocalyptic phrase of “the end of the world” for aboriginal people hence refers to historical injustices and violence as much as to present day

environmental destruction. Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957) depicts life, or what little is left of it, after nuclear war. In the novel, the beach is not a site of innocence and a new beginning but rather a site of conflict and culture clashes. John Marsden's seven-volumes teenage series *Tomorrow* (1993-1999) addresses the Anthropocene not through climate change but by focusing on attending ills such as resource management and population density. George Turner's disaster narrative *The Sea and Summer* (1987) finally deals with the effects of climate change such as water pollution and the greenhouse effect, albeit in a future that comfortably lies without the author's life-span in some future decades away. Crane's last fictional example is Alexis Wright's 2013 novel *The Swan Book* which presents an apocalyptic image of Australia's future by converging the topic of climate change with political and economic climates. "The deferral of environmental damage and its patternings through culture and cultural representation throughout the Australian archipelago," Crane concludes, in the analysed fictions "reiterate the European mindset that saw Australia as 'the End of the World'" (173).

Ruth-Barratt Peacock picks up on this idea of Australia as the world's end and correlates it with the limitations of language to grasp the new environment. Her contribution "The End of Words at the World's End: An Anthropocene Reading of David Malouf's 'The Crab Feast'" investigates how in an Australian cultural context, nature has always been a contested space of representation and knowledge production in the clash of indigenous and settler-colonialist cultures. Drawing on Judith Wright's notion of a "double vision" (1975: 59), Barratt-Peacock claims that immigrants to Australia had no linguistic codes, no means of representation for grasping and describing the new landscape with a flora and fauna so different from that back home. While Australian literature has thus from the start grappled with the difficult and fraught relationship of the subject to the land, the epoch of the Anthropocene adds to this that the consequences of environmental destruction are too complex to comprehend, let alone represent. On top of its historical baggage, Australian literature in the Anthropocene, Barratt-Peacock argues, rises to the challenge of representing the incomprehensible and irrepresentable. Barratt-Peacock shows this by closely analysing David Malouf's famous long poem "A Crab Feast," published in 1981 in the collection *First Things Last*. She examines the poem as a case in point for how Australian poetry in the Anthropocene explores the shifting relationship between animals, humans, and their environment. In the poem, the crab no longer appears as a mere foodstuff to the lyrical I but as a fellow creature which, when consumed, also reflects on human needs and their relation to the land. In this interconnectedness of

ecosystems the boundaries between hunter and hunted are blurred in favour of a kinship between the two.

The last section in the volume is the odd one out as it does not focus on a particular area or hemisphere but on medial aspects and manifestations of the Anthropocene. While Verena Laschinger's essay looks at eco-photography in North America and Andrea Krewani's on ecocinema in Canada, Philip Hüpkes examines medial aspects of the Anthropocene in more general terms and with a focus on how the Anthropocene is scientifically represented. In "‘Anthropogenic Earth Mediality’: On Scaling and Deep Time in the Anthropocene," he critically reexamines the concept of human agency in cultural responses to the Anthropocene by focusing on the role of media technologies in interpreting environmental processes. While definitions of the new epoch rest on perceiving the human species as a geological force, Hüpkes questions this claim, first of all, because it creates the illusion of uniformity. Secondly, the author argues, it assumes a linear causal connection between the environment and processes humanity is held responsible for and, last but not least, the conceptualization of human agency in definitions of the Anthropocene implies that agency is transparent and intelligible. This problematic notion of human agency, in Hüpkes opinion, makes scientific scaling in the Anthropocene very difficult as individual actions cannot be related to environmental disasters which are caused by global processes. This is further illustrated in the second part of the contribution by reference to the geological concept of "deep time," which challenges humanity's dominant influence in the Anthropocene and highlights that not all communication necessarily is human communication. Hüpke's underlying hypothesis is that conceptualizations of the Anthropocene heavily rely on media technologies and their interpretation as well as representation. Humanly induced effects on the environment only become accessible to humans through measurements and statistics that, however, rely on certain ways of interpreting the earth. Media therefore influence human decision making and invest the earth with a specific meaning, thus attributing a certain communicative function to earth itself that deludes any transparency of human agency.

In her contribution "On Photography in the Anthropocene: Surface Views and Imagetexts by J. Henry Fair and Tom McCarthy," Verena Laschinger investigates the "floating bird's eye view" of eco-photography, which to her has become the "paradigmatic visual mode of the Anthropocene" (219). Spurred by the toxic discourse of the 1970s, environmentally conscious photography has since then recorded environmental disasters. Eco-photography in the age of the Anthropocene has added to this a "dwelling in crisis" (Buell 2003) expressed in photographic representation in a bird's

eye's view which, however, no longer wants to achieve totality. On the contrary, aerial photography in the Anthropocene "obscure[s] any comprehensive sense" (223) and is aimed at estrangement and defamiliarization rather than wholeness. Panoramic control gives way to cognitive dissonance in contemporary eco-photography. Laschinger starts out with an analysis of Tom McCarthy's novel *Satin Island* (2015) which in its intermedial depictions of environmental catastrophes such as oil spills references ecological disaster photography. The author relates *Satin Island* to photobooks such as Edward Burtynsky's *Manufactured Landscapes* (2003), J. Henry Fair's *The Day After Tomorrow: Images of Our Earth in Crisis* (2010), and Benjamin Grant's book collection of satellite images *Overview* (2016) to show how the novel is informed by eco-photography. Both text and images reflect on the fact that continuous environmental catastrophes, such as oil spills, are hard to comprehend and to represent in their full scale impact and that representation inevitably has to mediate reality by aesthetic means that can never wholly convey reality.

Andrea Krewani in "Ecocinema and Ecophilosophy in Canada" offers an overview of this specific film genre in Canada, especially in the context of indigenous film making. Canadian ecocinema has often been overlooked, she argues, because unlike ecocinema in the U.S., it is in the genre of documentary film that Canadian ecocinema has its strongest manifestations, and unlike Hollywood disaster blockbusters, Canadian environmentally conscious films are primarily found in the context of indigenous films. Krewani defines and distinguishes different modes and manners of Canadian ecocinema. She starts out by looking at films which in a romanticizing manner focus on a vanishing Inuit culture in the vanishing landscape of the Canadian North, such as Robert Flaherty's seminal "Nanook of the North" and Zacharias Kunuk's highly successful "Atarnajuat." Pierre Perrault's trilogy on the inhabitants of the Ile-aux-Coudres in the St. Lawrence River [*Pour La Suite Du Monde* (1963), *La Règne Du Jour* (1967) and *Les Voitures d'Eau* (1968)], although set in a different area, runs in the same vein, the author argues. In contrast to these films, Krewani identifies a variety of First Nations' and Inuit films which are concerned with issues of environmental justice as well as pressing present-day environmental problems such as pipeline constructions, uranium mining, or the plundering of resources on indigenous land. Last but not least, Krewani focuses on how the manner of representing such environmental issues is changing in Canada by looking at alternative media productions such as video installations or photography.

The contributions in this volume all probe the impact which the announcement and definition of the Anthropocene as a new geological

epoch has had on cultural productions and on a cultural awareness for our implications in and responsibility for nature. The Anthropocene is not just a conglomeration of scientific data and facts but narrativizes those facts as a story of a particular kind, depending on the historical framework and socio-cultural context. There is, as stated above, not one story of the Anthropocene but many, so that different artistic renditions of the Anthropocene tell us a lot about a respective nation's fears, myths, archetypes, and traditions of representing nature and environmental destruction. By looking at the US, Canada, and Australia we are focusing on settler societies that, among other things, used descriptions of nature and of humans' changing relationship to the environment as a touchstone for definitions of a changing national identity. The volume hence challenges the universality of the Anthropocene narrative and at the same time underlines that literature and art play a vital role in making tangible in various ways the abstract horrors of climate change and the destruction of planet earth.

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**EXPLORING NARRATIVE FORMS  
OF THE ANTHROPOCENE**

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE CHALLENGE OF THE ANTHROPOCENE AND THE SUSTAINABILITY OF TEXTS

HUBERT ZAPF

### **Literature, Crisis, and the Anthropocene**

Literature and culture have always been responding to a state of crisis, inasmuch as human history since ancient times has been characterized by a more or less uninterrupted series of crises not only in times of wars, revolutions, or epidemics, but in more “normal” times as well—crises that have been imaginatively represented in narrative and story-telling. One aspect of these crises has always been the relationship between humanity and the natural environment, whose both life-enabling and life-threatening forces have figured largely in cultural narratives from ancient to modern times. What has changed in our current epoch of the Anthropocene is that the environmental dimension of these crises has become dominant over all others, that the survival not only of humanity but of life on the planet is at stake.

The Anthropocene is a concept introduced by chemists Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer in 2000 “to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology” (2000: 17). Especially since the beginning of the Industrial Age, mankind’s activities have gradually become “a significant geological morphological force [...] due to the global nature of the climate system, the globalization of industrial capitalism, the continuing increase in the overall human population, and the accumulation of waste-matter such as CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere and plastic in oceans and landfill sites” (Kerridge 2017: xiii). According to an influential thesis by Bill McKibben, these developments bring with it what he calls “the end of nature,” pointing out that by changing the weather, “we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to

its meaning. Nature's independence is its meaning: without it there is nothing but us" (1989: 54).

This notion of the Anthropocene, however, and the concomitant assumption of the end of nature has provoked different, often diametrically opposed responses. On the one hand, and this is specifically emphasized in a *postcolonial* view—which is also represented in this volume—the contention that humanity acts as a single unified agent tends to obscure cultural diversity, imbalances of power, and unequal distribution of environmental risk between different parts and cultures of the world. On the other hand, and this is particularly emphasized in a *posthumanist* view—likewise addressed in this essay collection—the concept of the Anthropocene appears to reinstate human agency as the sole shaping force of the planetary ecosystem while neglecting the fundamental connectivity of human to nonhuman life, the material flows and exchanges between human and nonhuman agencies that Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino describe in their introduction to the 2017 edited volume *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene* (2017: 1-21). As Richard Kerridge points out in his foreword to this volume (Kerridge 2017: xiii-xvii), critically commenting on McKibben's thesis of the end of nature in a human-made artificial environment, "we are clearly embedded in ecosystems inhabited and constituted by numerous nonhuman creatures, some of them living inside our bodies. If we damage the systems, these creatures will suffer with us" (ibid. xv). And, he continues, the fact that human activity has become a geomorphic force does not simply mean an "enlargement of the scope of human artifice and power, since the geomorphic changes are, for the most part, unintended and threatening" (ibid. xiv). Indeed, "human capability is diminished by the spectacle of the sheer magnitude of the consequences we did not foresee" (ibid. xv).

Therefore, Kerridge suggests, we must perform a paradoxical task and do *both*: on the one hand, accept that there is no alternative to "a more concerted effort to engineer the climate and other ecological processes" (ibid. xiv-xv) and thus assume greater and more exceptional responsibility in the sense of what Crutzen and Stoermer's aim for, namely "to develop a world-wide accepted strategy leading to sustainability of ecosystems against human-induced stresses" (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000: 18); and on the other hand recognize that the Anthropocene "admonishes us for past hubris, and relegates us to the category of stumbling, floundering creatures whose plans go awry because we understand too little: In other words, natural creatures caught up in forces beyond our understanding. This latter perception returns us to nature" (Kerridge 2017: xv).

I agree with this argument here, which points to the inevitable assumption in ecological thought of a nature that exceeds the human grasp, even while it is always only accessible in a culturally mediated form. Instead of a radical social or anthropological constructivism that reduces the “other” of nonhuman nature once again to a mere extension of human culture, it is crucial to conceive of the ecological culture-nature relationship as an interrelated polarity whose poles are inseparable yet nevertheless irreducible to one another. Indeed, without this assumption of an always shifting but nevertheless real difference between human culture and nonhuman nature, the whole climate change argument would not work, as it is precisely the difference between anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic factors that underlies the statistical trajectories of climate change science as well as the distinction between climate and weather put forward in popular climate change debates. The Anthropocene as a new geological epoch presupposes both the merging and the differentiation between human and nonhuman agency, and thus between culture and nature, since climate change is by definition human-made and not “natural” in origin, even while the results of these processes are irreversible and endanger the survival of the human species whose historical-cultural agency has set them in motion. The discourses of climate change and of the Anthropocene presuppose the assumption that these phenomena are the result of human intervention in a prior, albeit dynamic and ever-changing, but nevertheless precariously balanced life-friendly planetary ecosystem, which has been increasingly disrupted in the course of unrestrained economic-technological human expansion. As such, this assumed prior state of relative planetary equilibrium represents the point of departure and frame of reference for current observations on the scale and degree of climate change, as well as for potential measures to avoid the worst-scenario environmental catastrophes.

This thinking together of both connectivity and difference between culture and nature is precisely what cultural ecology is trying to do. The agency of texts, or writing and reading, is clearly defined as a cultural, human agency, as are the concepts of sustainability and ecoethical responsibility; yet it is also true that from the very beginnings of literary history, literary texts have been centrally dealing with the co-evolutionary interaction between human and nonhuman life, matter and mind, external and internal ecosystems.

### **Aesthetics and Politics, Continuities and Discontinuities**

When thinking about literature and sustainability in the Anthropocene, there are some further implications that need to be kept in mind from a cultural-

ecological perspective. One implication concerns the relation between *politics and aesthetics*, between pragmatic and de pragmatized forms of discourse. On the one hand, for a responsible application of ecological thought to politics, a pragmatic-ethical attitude is required which aligns scientific knowledge, civic engagement, and democratic institutions into a decision- and goal-oriented personal and collective agency. On the other hand, the critical self-reflection of human civilization and the visionary actualization of unrealized ecocultural potentials, which are provided by the imaginative counterworlds of literature and art, are equally required for the long-term evolution of a sustainable and ecologically self-aware culture. The activation of this critical-creative potential, however, is enabled precisely through the suspension of immediate pragmatic-political purposes in the explorative space of the aesthetic, which is vitally interrelated with, but also functionally and semiotically distinct from, the domains of history and politics.

This resistance of the aesthetic to easy appropriation may at times complicate rather than facilitate immediate environmental activism and doctrinal certainties. As Heise observes, techniques such as multiperspectival narration can become a source of ecological (meta-) knowledge by conveying not any prior environmental “truth” but instead the divergences and contradictions of attitudes to environmental issues. In novels such as Mayra Montero’s *In the Palm of Darkness* or Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, both of which revolve around the search for a rare and endangered animal species—a frog species in Haiti in Montero’s novel, and a river dolphin species in the Sundarbans wetlands in India in Ghosh’s novel—, Western scientists are faced with indigenous guides who derive their “knowledge of nature” from their “familiarity and long-term residence in the local environment” (Heise 2008: 98). The encounter between different characters, cultures, and narrators implies a confrontation between “different kinds of knowledge,” between modern ecological science and intuitive-experiential forms of knowledge based not on technocentric rationality but on oral and local forms of biocentric culture-nature-symbiosis. That way, the novels render a broad spectrum of current environmental issues in a multi-voiced discourse that highlights “the kinds of cultural and epistemological synergies that [...] are necessary in an age of global ecological crisis” (ibid. 99). Such juxtapositions of heterogeneous views and values produce gaps, uncertainties, and indeterminacies in the texts, which may be seen to resist rather than support unidirectional ecological agency and political engagement. Yet it is these uncertainties and indeterminacies which create a textual space for otherness that alone can break up the sermonizing monologues of missionary (eco-) politics and open

the text for the active participation of the reader in the continual co-creation of those relational complexities which constitute ecological awareness and existence.

Another implication of thinking about literature and sustainability concerns the relation between *continuity and discontinuity*, between literary history and the literature of the Anthropocene. It has been argued that in view of the unprecedented scale of the environmental, economic, intellectual, and ethical challenges posed by climate change and the Anthropocene not only political agendas and sociocultural practices need to be drastically changed, but inherited categories of literature and literary knowledge need to be adjusted to a post-human condition, which limits the range of human agency and entangles the lives of individuals in hyper-real interdependencies that exceed their cognitive and emotional grasp. The multiplicity of causes for climate change as a slow, mostly invisible but nevertheless uncannily real phenomenon of global threat makes it hard for individuals to comprehend or effectively intervene in processes “whose scale, complexity and incalculability is such as to resist representation or being conceptualized” (Clark 2010: 132).

In this view, the Anthropocene represents a “threshold concept” in culture and therefore in literature, since it is both powerfully real and nevertheless remains invisible “in the human body’s field of vision” (Kerridge 2017: xiv). It is manifest in the microsphere of molecules and cells or in the macrosphere of the planet but is therefore too small or too big for human perception or experience. Inasmuch as all traditional literature and story-telling is based on such human categories of perception and experience, this “derangement of scale” (Clark 2015) calls for new forms of representation and story-telling that would be adequate to these challenges. Such an adequate response would mean to confront these multiple quandaries in a literary aesthetics that does not “turn on acts of individual decision or heroism that reinforce a culture of narcissistic individualism already implicated in consumer democracy and environmental danger” (Clark 2010: 144). Instead, as Clark argues, climate change can itself be seen as a “deconstructive force,” which seems “more germane to modes of representation that involve unfamiliar nonhuman agencies, multiple and perhaps elliptical plots. The situation invites a writing that might be a form of secularized magic realism, in which seemingly rational procedures and modes of thought and representation interact with bizarre and counter-intuitive nonhuman agencies, kinds of action-at-a-distance, with plural conventions of characterization, symbolization and plotting” (ibid.). Following Heise, Clark mentions David Brin’s speculative science fiction novel *Earth* (1990) as an example of such a form of literary representation

“that might be adequate to global environmental dangers and quandaries” (ibid.).

Clark’s argument is in part quite plausible, but the reasons he gives also undermine his claim of a radical break with the literary past. As he asserts, the adequacy of Brin’s novel as a literary response to the challenge of climate change consists not alone in its themes but its multilayered staging of a global disaster “conveyed through a multiplication of fragmented narrative viewpoints and through various generic modes—myth, epic, allegory—techniques that is, previously associated with the urban novel of literary modernism (James Joyce, John Dos Passos)” (ibid.). What this implies is that in its new form of Anthropocene writing, Brin’s novel at the same time draws on the repertoire of genres from the deep time archives of literature—myth, epic, allegory—as well as on the multiperspectival narrative techniques of literary modernism. A purely oppositional, radically discontinuous view of the relation between the literary past and the Anthropocene not only neglects the significance of memory for any sustainable vision of the future (Meireis and Rippl 2019); it also eclipses the long history of the ways in which imaginative literature has been dealing with crisis, disaster, and, indeed, with alternative forms of culture-nature communication. In this sense, it is the argument of cultural ecology that the history of literature should not be simply dismissed as part of an anthropocentric past but that it offers a rich and indispensable source for models of sustainable ecological thought and writing that appears of continued relevance today. This is why ecocritical literary studies have defined themselves not least through their productive reinterpretation of the archives of literary theory and history.

## **The Ecological Turn in Literary Studies and the Rewriting of the Archives of Theory and Literature**

In its widest sense as proposed by Foucault, the archive is what regulates what can be said and what remains unsayable in the discourses of a culture, what is preserved and what is silenced in cultural memory. Archives in this view always involve processes of inclusion and exclusion, of selection and legitimation that are intrinsically related to the institutionalized “regimes of truth” from which such archives emerge. In the case of the archives of literary and cultural studies, this means that the sources of disciplinary knowledge production such as texts and theories, canons and methods of interpretation, historical and aesthetic premises, are both preserved and constantly being redefined by the shifting epistemic paradigms that are shaping the discipline. In our situation today, it would certainly be

misleading to assume any one such single predominant epistemic paradigm in literary studies, but among the range of diverse current approaches in our field, a development towards a more ecologically-minded orientation does seem to be one of its characteristic overarching features.

What this entailed in terms of redefining the archives of the discipline manifested itself at first in the emergence of ecocriticism in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century, when with the landmark book by Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, the tradition of American nature writing in the footsteps of Henry David Thoreau was reassessed as an important contribution to a more ecologically minded literary culture than that offered by the then prevalent canons of modern and postmodern texts and theories (Buell 1995). As this narrow realist focus widened in the successive waves that characterized the accelerating growth of ecocritical studies, other hitherto neglected or unheard sources and voices were rediscovered or newly written into the archive from ecofeminist, postcolonial, indigenous, media- or genre-specific perspectives and from the unearthing of an ever-increasing wealth of proto-ecological sources from earlier historical periods. The effect has been an enormous extension and diversification of the field, but also an ecological rereading of major texts and theoretical models.

One of the most significant of these developments was the extension of the initial Anglo-American focus towards a transnational and indeed global framework, which at the same time went along with a growing awareness of the diversity of distinct cultures of ecological knowledge. A sign of this double but interconnected tendency are volumes such as the *Cambridge Global History of Literature and the Environment* on the one hand (Parham and Westling 2017), and *Ecological Thought in German Literature and Culture* (Dürbeck et al. 2017) on the other. Both appeared in 2017, one trying to convey a sense of the multiplicity of ecological cultures worldwide, the other taking the example of German studies to assess the distinct contributions of German literature and culture to transnational ecological thought. In between these poles, the *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology* (Zapf 2016b) steers a middle course in that it is conceived from a European background but also includes ecocritical positions from the U.S. and from around the world.

The redefinition of the archive that this entails can be clearly seen in the German studies volume just mentioned. While covering emergent genres of environmentally engaged writing such as climate fiction, ecothrillers, and ecopoetry, it also traces proto-ecological ideas in classical and romantic writers and reassesses the contributions to ecological thought by theoretical approaches from *Naturphilosophie* to phenomenology, from the Frankfurt School to Niklas Luhmann's systems theory and Ulrich Beck's notion of