

The US and the World We Inhabit

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Edited by

Silvia Guslandi, Adele Tiengo,
Anastasia Cardone and Paola Loreto

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FOREWORD

The past three years have been a time of such bellicose American nationalism and isolationism on the part of the federal government – “only America first, America first” really set the tone – that it can be difficult to remember that there is a better America than the current regime represents... and that there have always been evil and disruptive and self-interested American actors on the world stage.

When the Italian Association of North American Studies met in Milan in September 2017 to explore the subject of “The US and the World We Inhabit,” Donald J. Trump had occupied the White House for less than a year, yet it was already clear that he had unleashed a posse of incompetent and greedy crooks and family members at the highest levels of the American government, goose-stepping to the mantra Trump himself had blurted out during his inauguration speech on 20 January 2017: “We assembled here today are issuing a new decree to be heard in every city, in every foreign capital, and in every hall of power. From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this day forward, it’s going to be only America first, America first.”

What we’ve learned in the dismal months since the day Trump’s inauguration drew a tiny crowd to the National Mall in Washington, DC, is that “America first” actually meant “Trump first.” From violations of the emoluments clause of the United States Constitution (which prohibits members of the American government from receiving payments and gifts from foreign governments) to blatant and outrageous pandering to the president’s racist supporters (his so-called “base”), it has quickly become clear that Trump’s loyalty has always only been to “Trump first, Trump first.”

Many of us in the United States have spent the years since the election in November 2016 looking for silver linings during this dark-cloud moment in national and world history. The Women’s March that took place the day following Trump’s inauguration in Washington and in cities throughout the country was the largest single-day protest in American history, involving between three and five million people, according to various estimates. In the months that followed, similar marches challenged the new administration to honor the importance of science and to recognize the validity and urgency of global climate change.

Despite these efforts to push back at the American government, the president announced on June 1, 2017, that the United States would cease participating in the 2015 Paris climate agreement (COP 21). In 2019, coal industry lobbyist Andrew Wheeler has been confirmed as director of the Environmental Protection Agency, and the White House is planning to create a panel of “federal scientists” to dispute the severity of climate change and the anthropogenic source of climate impacts. I happened to be in Beijing, China, in June 2017, just at the moment when Trump was abdicating American leadership in climate-change-mitigation efforts, meeting with Professor Cheng Hong, a leading Chinese ecocritic and the wife of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. My colleague Terry Tempest Williams, a leading environmental writer, was with me in Beijing and asked Professor Cheng if she was hopeful about the future. She responded with a quiet “Yes” and an oracular smile, the implication being: Don’t worry, China is prepared to step forward as America steps back.

The center of the dark cloud of Trumpism is becoming darker and darker. At the same time, in February 2019, while Trump himself tried and failed to reach a nuclear agreement with North Korea during an all-but-ignored summit meeting with dictator Kim Jong Un in Hanoi, Vietnam, most Americans were busy watching the congressional oversight committee interview a former Trump insider, Michael Cohen, who revealed exceptionally damning information about Trump’s financial behavior and legal missteps.

Perhaps more significantly on the level of grassroots cultural change, young Americans are defying the rhetoric and selfishness of the American government by joining forces with other young people throughout the world and insisting that our governments and industries act in response to the planetary climate crisis. Many of us in the United States were moved and inspired when fifteen-year-old Greta Thunberg, from Sweden, took the stage at the COP24 meetings in Katowice, Poland, in December 2018 and said, “You say you love your children above all else, and yet you are stealing their future in front of their very eyes. We have come here to let you know that change is coming, whether you like it or not.” *Washington Post* reporter Sarah Kaplan revealed in February 2019 that there is “a cadre of young, fierce and mostly female activists,” including thousands of kids in the United States and more than twenty other countries, who have launched a new School Strike 4 Climate movement. Kaplan’s article illuminates another side of American society, an utterly, defiantly anti-Trumpian sub-culture. This youth-led movement, like the Women’s March, the March for Science, and the Great March for Climate Action, is a brilliant silver lining during an otherwise grim moment in history,

particularly for a scholar and teacher like me, who works in the environmental humanities.

But I have been involved for many years in a discipline that derives much of its inspiration from Henry David Thoreau's famous statement in "Civil Disobedience" (1849): "If the injustice is part of the friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth – certainly the machine will wear out ... Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine." While many scholars and writers exploring the relationship between human experience and culture and the more-than-human world are interested in timeless pursuit of truth and beauty, others are on the front lines of social justice and environmental activism, embracing their work as a "counter-friction" to injustice and despair. Maggie Millner captured this when she interviewed Christoph Irmscher from Indiana University, who was co-president of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment in 2017:

The Trump Administration's proposed 2018 budget would also eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities.... In light of such threats, [ASLE co-president Christoph] Irmscher looks to literature for models of political environmentalism. "Panels and presentations of Thoreau's *Walden* – to mention one of the intellectual progenitors of ASLE – can no longer ignore the fact that his philosophy of resistance has assumed new importance in an era when the government systematically suppresses scientific evidence," he says.

This philosophy of social resistance, inherited from Thoreau and institutionalized by way of ASLE, is at the heart of the environmental humanities (including such subfields as ecocriticism), as I understand the discipline. I described this idea in my 2008 book *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility*: "'Relevance' is a dirty word, a trivializing inclination. But in ecocriticism and related fields relevance is the Holy Grail – an intensifier of meaning, a trigger of passion" (xv). This commitment to advancing the intersections between environmental humanities research and social causes – and comparable academic work in other fields – has led me more recently to channel these ideas into such online media as the Arithmetic of Compassion website (www.arithmeticofcompassion.org), an extension of my 2015 co-edited book *Numbers and Nerves: Information, Emotion, and Meaning in a World of Data*.

Millner, in her article about ASLE, also acknowledged the organization's "core mission" to join forces with other organizations and

individuals throughout the world to grapple with serious humanitarian and ecological crises. She quoted Irmscher again:

In a climate that discourages innovation, scientists have adopted new roles as dissenters and protesters,” says Irmscher. “As they unite and march, they find new allies in the arts and humanities that have long spoken truth to power. ASLE, whose core mission is to promote collaboration and public dialogue, provides an organizational framework for such new alliances.

This impulse to seek out new alliances and to combine intellectual pursuits with social engagement is essential to keep in mind as we contemplate “The US and the World We Inhabit.” Despite the American government’s dramatic recent turn away from progressive social and environmental engagement, the American people – certainly most American artists, humanists, and scientists – remain steadfastly in support of joining forces with our colleagues from around the world to make a positive difference. In my own work, this impulse toward social engagement has included leading personal testimony writing workshops with groups of students and laypeople in far-flung locations such as Islamabad, Pakistan, and the island of Guam and also the inclusion of op-ed and press-release writing exercises in my graduate seminars, in the hopes that my students will work on projects that deserve the attention of the general public. This latter effort was inspired, in part, by Marybeth Gasman’s collection *Academics Going Public: How to Write and Speak Beyond Academe* (2016).

This book, I believe, intersects deeply with the ethos and vision I have expressed in these remarks. Today’s headlines are full of dire drama – of bellicosity and isolationism – much of it emanating from American politicians. But the American people, on the whole, remain dedicated to the quest for meaningful and sustainable relationships. In the activist efforts I’ve described above, I find a spirit of hopefulness – perhaps what author Loren Eiseley once called “midnight optimism” (11). I take heart in the studies of identity, relationships, and activist protest offered here. These ideas represent the best concerns and qualities of American culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Environmental and global perspectives are currently at the center of the most lively and urgent international scholarship, as apparent from a review of the latest titles published in the fields of literary and cultural studies. These range from general introductions, such as *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, edited by Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen and Michelle Niemann in 2017, to the attempt to integrate a local (if not national) discourse on Environmental Humanities into a global conversation, such as *Italy and the Environmental Humanities: Landscapes, Natures, Ecologies*, edited by Serenella Iovino, Enrico Cesaretti, Elena Past and Rosi Braidotti for the University of Virginia Press in 2018, or *Readings in the Anthropocene: The Environmental Humanities, German Studies, and Beyond*, edited by Sabine Wilke, Japhet Johnstone and Axel Goodbody for New York Bloomsbury Academic in 2017. A world approach to literary studies is thriving, as two significant titles will show. In 2017, Louise Nilsson, David Damrosch, Theo D’Haen, Jale Parla and Longxi Zhang edited *Crime Fiction as World Literature* for Bloomsbury Academic, examining one of the most widely spread literary genres “in its full global and plurilingual dimensions, taking the genre seriously as a participant in the international sphere of world literature,” and providing, as the publisher’s ad runs, “new insights not only into the genre itself but also into the transnational flow of literature in the globalized mediascape of contemporary popular culture.” Moreover, a selection of pamphlets from the Stanford Literary Lab, advancing the study of Digital Humanities, is covering a series of international publications (*Canon/Archive: Studies in Quantitative Formalism*, issued also in a French and an Italian edition). Finally, the birth in 2016 of the *Journal of World Literature*, and the proliferation, in the long wake of the historical *ISLE*, of journals such as *The Journal of Ecocriticism*, *Environmental Humanities*, *Ecozon@*, *Resilience* and *Ethics & the Environment*, proves the flourishing state of international research in Environmental Humanities and its unavoidable and desirable extension to and interaction with a global perspective.

This is only natural at a time marked by increasing flows of people due to migration, war and the refugee crisis. These phenomena have reached massive rates in the last decade resulting in circulation of people, ideas,

cultures and languages at an unprecedented scale. As Christa Greve-Vollp's introductory essay recounts, mobility studies are investigating a crucial concern of our globalized society. The "new mobilities paradigm," which includes all the multifaceted aspects of our "being on the move," highlights the contradictory effects of the various forms of physical movement occurring in today's world, and the opposing values attached to them. The revised, more complex, and hopefully more adequate theoretical grid for the study of contemporary phenomena reveals as well a new version and concept of modernity, blurring the divide between nature and culture. Moreover, the intersection of mobility studies with ecocosmopolitanism has produced the richness of ecocritical literature regarding movement (of people and natural agents), sense of place and environmental concerns and care.

A global outlook has been long adopted in fields immediately affected by the supranatural logic of capitalism – economic and political theory, in particular. However, several areas of the humanities, including American Studies, have maintained a somewhat self-referentiality. Transnationalism and translanguaging, though of course topics of interest particularly in the last decades, have largely been approached as phenomena to observe in dialogue with a language, literature and culture of the United States viewed as a coherent and consistent whole, rather than as factors that complicate and disrupt the very core of America's identity. Significant attempts have nonetheless been made to overcome this still diffuse scholarly assumption, such as in the volume *America After Nature: Democracy, Culture, Environment*, edited by Catrin Gersdorf and Juliane Braun (Heidelberg, Germany, Universitätsverlag Winter, 2016), which investigates the social, political, ethical and aesthetic issues arisen in a "postnatural" America in a global perspective; and Thomas Bender's fine distinction between the ideological construct of "exceptionalism" and the historical process of "transnationalism" ("The United States in World History: Transnationalism v. Exceptionalism," *RSA Journal*, no. 27, 2016, pp. 17-34).

The same can be said about environmental concerns, which are rightfully coming to the fore alongside the increased awareness of the emergency state of the natural environment. Awareness of this environmental crisis and of its relation to human activities has grown since the 1970s, partly as a result of the prominence given to so-called "environmental disasters," partly as a better understanding of processes such as the depletion of the stratospheric ozone, air, soil, and water degradation, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and anthropogenic climate change. Despite this increasing consciousness, scientists' alarm calls, and

international agreements – from the Kyoto Protocol (1997) to the 2015 COP 21 held in Paris – political actions have proven insufficient to reverse, decelerate, and contrast climate change. As the Special Report 15 by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) confirms, the average global temperature may rise in 1.5 degrees by 2030, thus causing irreversible environmental changes, if serious and effective measures are not implemented. These measures not only include new environmental policies, but also extend to raising political, social, and cultural awareness in the global population. In addressing the threats of global warming, equity, eradication of poverty, sustainable development, environmental ethics, and cultural education are all sides of the same coin and they enhance one another. In this world-wide scenario, the humanities play a vital part in heightening environmental awareness and providing comprehensive and creative solutions to increased human detachment from the environment.

Given this raised consciousness in human responsibilities about the environment and scholarly attention to such themes, ecocriticism has been gaining favor as method for the analysis of specific texts marked by a particularly strong interest in the natural. A deeper understanding of its methodological and ethical basis, however, reveals its usefulness as a model for the observation and analysis of the mutual and shifting positions of self and other, which are no longer to be viewed as the opposite poles of a binary – such as male vs female, rich vs poor, north vs south, human vs nonhuman – but rather as deeply intertwined and in constant transformation.

The sheer scale and complexity of present day global and environmental issues demands a rethinking within the field of American studies of concepts such as center(s) and margin(s), subject(s) and object(s). Scholars are required/called to overcome these binaries by reframing them in terms of relation, and particularly of an inclusive structure of relations, based on an ethical approach to ecology. As an umbrella term for a wide range of perspectives, environmental ethics is concerned with the relationship between human beings and non-human nature, based on a reflection on the ethical responsibility of the former and on the moral standing of the latter.

Rooted in Charles Darwin's studies on the evolution of the species, the necessity to rethink the relationship between human beings and the environment was made urgent in the 20th century by the worldwide spreading perception of a crisis that was becoming serious enough to call for scholarly reflection. Awareness of the vulnerability of the Earth was awakened by a growing number of studies on the effects of human action on ecological equilibrium. Marine biologist Rachel Carson drew attention to the harmful effects of pesticides, while ecologists Anne and Paul Erlich

warned against the dangers of the uncontrolled growth of human population. The report *The Limits of Growth*, commissioned by the Club of Rome to a team of MIT researchers led by Dennis Meadows (1972), summed up the environmental concerns of those years by sanctioning the need for a basic change of values, both at an individual and a political level, to regain ecological equilibrium.

A reflection on the value – either instrumental or intrinsic – of nature is at the heart of environmental ethics as a philosophical discipline, which has in Aldo Leopold’s *land ethic* (1949) one of its forerunners. As Fritz Fleischman reminds us in his essay, Leopold called for an ethic that “enlarges the boundaries of the community to include solids, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.” As non-human nature entered the field of moral investigation, human culture began to be studied for its environmental implications, with the rapid expansion of ecocritical analysis. Transnational and environmental perspectives are thus becoming enmeshed as ecocriticism itself assumes a cosmopolitan and even planetary perspective.

The four sections that make up this volume display its placement within the most recent theoretical and critical trends, while the different directions highlighted by their titles showcase the multidisciplinary character and broad scope of the inquiries collected therein. Three of the sections combine both literary and historical essays.

The first section questions the central theme of any discourse interested in the relationship between self and place, from the first pioneering space vs place theories to the most recent developments in the field. It focuses, that is, on the spatial basis of identity and the experience of belonging or not belonging generated by varying aspects of mobility or ecological outlooks.

Christa Greve-Wollp’s essay opens the section and lays down the groundwork by introducing and defining the key topics of mobility, migration and ecology. The essay reframes mobility as a major contributor to the identity of a place and of the people inhabiting it. It also presents the most recent developments in ecocriticism toward an eco-cosmopolitanism, functioning as an introduction to the entire section.

The following essays all explore the relationship between self and environment in different directions. Alana Dagenhart identifies poetry as the means of place formation in three Carolina poets, who experience mountains as sacred spaces in opposition to the confined setting of manmade churches. Katherine Lynes blurs the line between self and environment in her analysis of Vieve Francis’s “Another Antipastoral”. The classic eco-poetic element of the wildness is located within the black

subject, in the form of an empathetic embodiment that helps overcome the deleterious effects of racism and environmental destruction and turning on its head the idea of human progress and conquest. Salvatore Proietti continues, in part, the dialogue with Black Studies, in his essay on US science fiction, in which he explores the role of suffering in identity formation by examining the category of ‘kinship’ in works by Octavia E. Butler, Cordwainer Smith and “James Tiptree”/Alice Sheldon. All three of the authors articulate notions of identity, equality and humanity through transgressions of bodily boundaries. Mena Mitrano aims at understanding the specific contribution of Hannah Arendt – German born but arguably American – to the debate on the meaning of “world,” by proposing a notion of modernity that relies on anachronism. Finally, the section ends with two explorations of food. Francesca De Lucia presents it as a means to heal the wounds of immigration and ethnic alienation in the work of Louise De Salvo. Historian Stefano Luconi makes food the center of his analysis of Fascist Italy’s attempt to control the communities of Little Italies by making the most of widespread nationalistic sentiments among Italian immigrants in the US.

Environmental concerns and their relation to literature are the core of the second section, which examines the ways in which various works of fiction and poetry grapple with the consequences of landscape transformation. It is not surprising, given the urgency of the topic, that climate change is at the center of several of the essays. Greta Gaard opens the series by exploring both scientific and popular narratives on climate change and in particular the dominant North American narrative of the pursuit of happiness through consumption, acquisition and travel – experiences in which human beings act on the environment with an attitude of conquest. The methodological foundation of the study is eco-psychology, which distinguishes between “affect tolerance” and “affect phobia” and thus suggests the public’s need for adequate information about the current environmental crisis. Conversely, Francesca Razzi’s essay on Poe’s short story “The Landscape Garden” (1850) argues for an aesthetically anthropocentric view of the landscape, in which nature is a complex work of art at the hands of man, the “artifex polytechnes.”

Some of the essays in this section deal with manmade, and specifically urban, landscapes, in works that denounce the consequences of segregation and/or gentrification of historically African-American or Latin-American neighborhoods. Monia Dal Checco draws from theoretical approaches as far-reaching as cultural geography, critical urban studies and post-soul literary aesthetics to analyze the interrelatedness of black

identity and issues of control over urban spaces in Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* (2015). Similar racial concerns permeate Paola Nardi's essay on Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008), which highlights the specificity of the African-American experience of the wilderness, due to its history of bondage and discrimination.

Anna Zappatini presents the Victorian traveller and writer Marianne North's encounters with different American landscapes as a pioneering instance of environmental awareness. Nicholas Stangherlin, instead, approaches the fin-de-siècle through a selection of speculative-utopian works of fiction that attempt to regenerate Frederick Jackson Turner's theorization of the frontier by inventing new 'deserts' to be made into 'gardens', thus demonstrating how these writers expanded the notion of wilderness to include anxieties and concerns of a burgeoning global empire.

The third section of the volume is more contemporary in focus, given its concern with new forms and spaces of protest in the context of the ecological networks of the 20th and 21st centuries. The two essays that constitute the literary subsection share an interest in the emergence of environmental activism, albeit in different intellectual contexts. In dealing with three short stories by Grace Paley, Cristina Di Maio analyzes the playground as site both for a powerless mirroring of forms of oppression and stagnation of society at large and for actual protest, thanks to the free creative impulse associated with play. Fritz Fleischmann, on the other hand, explores the conception of an environmental ethics in American ecologist Aldo Leopold and German-American philosopher Hans Jonas. Independently from each other, the two thinkers advocated for an ecological consciousness that extended the boundaries of ethics to all forms of life and warned against uncontrolled growth and technological hubris.

The historical subsection is made up of three essays that examine the topic of environmental activism in recent decades. Peter Bardaglio investigates new forms of grassroots protest and sub-national support for climate change prevention in direct opposition to the dramatic reversal in environmental policy brought about by the Trump administration. Nicolangelo Becce and Albert Latorella Lehner, on their part, look back to the 1990s to examine the pushback against English linguistic imperialism and its fatal impact on local languages and cultures. Their essay ends with similar concerns about the Trump era and the possibility of a new American imperialism that threatens to shatter a developing language ecology both within and beyond the borders of the United States. Elisa

Roncoli goes even further back to the 1960s, in her study of Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968), which she presents as an attempt to narrate and explain the shift from private to collective history and the rise of new forms of public participation and long lasting myths.

The volume ends with a section devoted to linguistic issues, and specifically to the problem of mediation, which stands out as one of the most urgent in an age of unparalleled globalization and circulation of people, cultures and languages as well as of a new understanding of the relationship between human and nonhuman life. The essays included all point to new forms of textuality, whether generated by means of translation, self-translation, multilingual and interlingual composition or a combination of these phenomena. Silvia Guslandi and Valerio Massimo De Angelis both examine the paradoxical location of Italian American authors in the early 20th century. Guslandi offers a linguistic analysis of poems by Emanuel Carnevali, who aspired to become "American," but whose writing was born in the interstices between English and Italian, and presents the case of migrant authors as pointing toward the need for a transnational perspective when approaching 20th and 21st century literature. De Angelis focuses, instead, on the novel *Christ in Concrete* (1939) by Pietro Di Donato, highlighting the author's linguistic strategies based on a complex procedure of self-translation. David Lloyd sheds light on Emily Dickinson's peculiar translation of non-human life in the language of poetry by exploring the presence of birds in several of her works. The essay frames Dickinson within an ecological perspective, arguing against an anthropocentric reading and instead pointing toward modes of representation aimed at preserving the mystery of non-human creatures that are still used by ecopoets today.

Kathryn Wolfe-Quintero and Rita Filanti end the volume with essays that offer historical perspectives on language. Wolfe-Quintero argues that during the Trump administration public discourse is becoming one of the strongest tools in the hands of American people to resist an anti-public discourse rhetorically constructed around dividing, threatening, blaming and gaslighting. Filanti examines the tension between property rights and appropriation, assimilation and exclusion in O. E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie* (1927). The essay explores the ways in which the self-translation from Nordland dialect to American English, carried out by the immigrant author in collaboration with others and appropriated by the American canon, challenges notions of originality and authorship.

Acknowledgements

The essays collected in this volume were originally presented at the Twenty-Fourth Biennial International Conference of A.I.S.N.A. (the Italian Association of American Studies), *The U.S. and the World We Inhabit*, which took place in Milan, Italy, from the 28th to the 30th of September, 2017. More than 150 participants convened at l'Università degli Studi di Milano, or “la Statale,” coming from the US, Canada, Europe, Japan, China, Australia, Morocco and Dubai. On one hand at the center of Italy’s financial and commercial power and the most modern and culturally hybrid of the country’s cities, on the other hand located in one of the most polluted areas in Europe, Milan offered participants the ideal location to discuss the global and environmental issues at the core of the conference’s topic. We wish to express our gratitude to both Milan and the University of Milan for their warm hospitality and cultural vibrancy. The essays in this volume are a tribute to the high quality of the discussions that took place at the conference, thanks to the open, supportive and yet intellectually challenging atmosphere provided by the venue. We wish to thank all of the conference participants for their commitment as well as their enthusiastic response to the proposal that led to this volume. In particular, we gratefully acknowledge the crucial role played by the plenary speakers, Peter Bardaglio, Greta Gaard and Scott Slovic, who ensured a rich, interdisciplinary and thought-provoking conversation for those in attendance and who generously contributed their lectures and foreword to this volume. Thanks also go to the A.I.S.N.A. President Elisabetta Vezzosi, to the A.I.S.N.A. Board, and to the local committee, for supporting the conference organization every step of the way and for offering help and advice when needed. The essays contained in this volume represent only a small percentage of the papers originally presented at the conference and have been extensively revised and reworked for publication. All were selected through peer-review process. A special thanks is thus due to the reviewers who helped with the arduous task of selection, lending their efforts to assess submissions and provide feedback. Finally, heartfelt thanks to Cinzia Schiavini for her editorial support.

Silvia Guslandi, Adele Tiengo, Anastasia Cardone and Paola Loreto

I

RELATIONS OF SELF & THE OTHER: QUESTS FOR IDENTITY & NEW FORMS OF BELONGING

MOBILITY, MIGRATION AND THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

CHRISTA GREWE-VOLPP

Mobility studies takes a closer look at the different meanings and functions of mobility in today's increasingly globalized world. Mobility is a highly political, economic, social and cultural phenomenon, which directly influences the identity of place and the people inhabiting it, for better or for worse. Ecocritics whose major goal is the study of the imbrications of nature and culture have increasingly begun to understand nature as highly mobile and to ask what happens when we realize that natural phenomena are agentic travelers. This paper reads Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* as an apt literary example of nature and of people being on the move. It demonstrates how mobility in the text is not only socially constructed, but that it is also a phenomenon of nature's dynamic quality, and that both aspects of mobility mingle in important ways.

Mobility Studies

Mobility, or physical movement across space, has become a crucial concern in today's globalized world. It is a highly political, economic, social and cultural phenomenon which has been celebrated as a welcome opportunity to exchange ideas and goods, and to enhance modern life, but which has also led to nationalistic, sometimes even xenophobic fortifications of borders. Mobility has enriched the global lives of some, but it has impoverished many others who are either stuck in disadvantaged places or forced to move for a wide variety of reasons. For some time now, scholars, especially sociologists (but also anthropologists, geographers, historians and others), have begun to investigate the meanings of being on the move in a globalized world. They have coined terms such as the "mobilities turn" (Hannam et al.) or the "new mobilities paradigm" (Sheller and Urry), and explored mobility not as an exception to a usually stable form of life, but acknowledged it "as part of the energetic buzz of the everyday (even while banal or humdrum, or even stilled) and seen as a

set of highly meaningful social practices that make up social, cultural and political life” (Adey, et al. 3).

In his landmark study *On the Move*, Tim Creswell argues that specifically Western modernity is unthinkable without mobility. “Indeed,” he writes, “the word *modern* seems to evoke images of technological mobility – the car, the plane, the spaceship. It also signifies a world of increased movement of people on a global scale” (15). Mobility is also inextricably linked to the construction of a particular American identity: historically, the American continent was settled by immigrants, the open frontier implied a promising movement West, and the very idea of freedom was and is linked to the possibility to move – geographically, culturally, economically.

Taking a closer look at the meanings and functions of mobility, Creswell emphasizes that it is not just another word for movement, but significantly a “socially produced motion,” it is practiced, experienced, and embodied (*On the Move* 3). After all, it is real, physical people who are on the move – tourists, business people, students, refugees, migrant workers, and others – who experience mobility in very different ways. All of these movements are culturally and socially defined. Mobility cannot be understood, according to Creswell, without recourse to representation on the one hand, and the fact of material corporeality on the other (4).

Therefore, in light of these diverse reasons and motivations for moving, the meanings of mobility differ. Sheller and Urry have, among others, aptly pointed out that mobility is defined by geometries of power. They claim in their definition of the “new mobilities paradigm” that mobility “is a resource to which not everyone has an equal relationship” (211), and that the ability to move freely is a prerogative of the privileged. Other disadvantaged people are forced to move for political, economic, environmental or other reasons which do not lead to an experience of freedom, but to frustration, anxiety, maybe even violence due to the stress of displacement, alienation, and isolation. Others again cannot move at all, but because of their ethnicity, class or gender are confined to places they would much rather leave. Movement also challenges established forms of power that, according to Creswell, are mapped as a pattern of clear boundaries, inside of which, people belong to certain places. It is nomads, tramps, fugitives, refugees, etc., who disrupt such fixed notions of belonging and, by implication, of identity. They embody and practice a form of mobility which some regard as a threat (“Foreword” 7). However, it is exactly these people (and ideas) on the move that contribute to the development of a culture. Stephen Greenblatt has pointed out that identities and cultural legitimacy cannot be defined by a sense of

rootedness, but rather that disruptive forces such as “colonization, exile, emigration, wandering, contamination, and unintended consequences, along with the fierce compulsions of greed, longing, and restlessness” shape identity and language (2). He believes that cultures have always been highly influenced by social phenomena such as exile, migration, and economic exchange and not by some kind of authentic, essential state of being: “in matters of culture the local has always been irradiated, as it were, by the larger world” (4).

Another important aspect to be considered in the analysis of mobility is therefore its complex entanglement with concepts of place in a globalized world. Mobility challenges the binary opposition between ostensibly authentic, local places and the more dynamic forces of global areas, between notions of rootedness and stability on the one hand and deterritorialized, global non-places on the other. Social and human geographers such as David Harvey and Doreen Massey have reconceptualized place as a mixture of wider and more than local social relations that are connected to global flows. Their studies contest views of place as bounded, i.e. as defined by their borders and their difference from outsiders (the us-versus-them paradigm). Especially Massey’s “progressive sense of place” is helpful here because it identifies place as being shaped by historical, political, cultural, economic and other processes. These processes, involving people as well as objects and ideas, are by definition never static, but mobile. Her sense of place is not a denial of uniqueness; it means that uniqueness derives from the specificity of a place’s interactions with the outside world that is always and continuously being produced (Massey 155, 156). Sheller and Urry argue similarly that places and persons are connected through performances, which means that places are what they are because people act in them in certain ways or as a reaction to other people acting in specific ways. Places are “implicated within complex networks by which hosts, guests, buildings, objects, and machines are contingently brought together [...]” (214). In other words: mobility contributes to the identity of place and to the people inhabiting place.

Ecocriticism and the Mobilities Paradigm

In their investigations of the meaning of being on the move in a globalized world, of crossing borders and meeting or clashing with local cultures, scholars have not only explored the movement of human beings and of finances, goods, and ideas. They have also increasingly begun to look at nature as highly mobile and to ask what happens when we realize that

natural phenomena are dynamic travelers. What meaning is attributed to storms and floods, the migration of birds, insects and other animals, or of plants and viruses? What does our narration of these incidents reveal about our ideologies, our values, anxieties, or hopes? How do we have to modify our understanding of the imbrications of nature and culture when cultures as well as natural phenomena are seen as active participants of mobility?

Such questions are a central part of ecocritical inquiries. Although ecocriticism has diversified and developed into many branches since its beginning in the 1990s – from a mostly place-based analysis of a preferably wild nature to approaches from theories of ecofeminism, environmental justice, green postcolonialism, animal studies, new materialism and others – the common denominator is still the analysis of the relationship between nature and culture. For ecocritics today, there is no clear boundary between nature and culture. On the contrary, the nature-culture divide is considered highly problematic, as it reveals the power structures in hierarchical dualisms. They argue, albeit in many different ways, that today's urgent environmental problems can be solved only if the power structures inherent in binary thinking are tackled.

A very important step in the development of ecocriticism was the expansion of a place-based ecocriticism to a planetary, global, “eco-cosmopolitan” perspective, which made productive use of several border-crossing inquiries. Lawrence Buell was one of the first ecocritics who urged readers in 2007 to take an “ecoglobalist stance,” “a whole-earth way of thinking and feeling about environmentality” (227), a stance which would imply “an imagined inextricable linkage of some sort between that specific site and a context of planetary reach” (232). Australian philosopher Val Plumwood saw the need to relate to local places of belonging as an important part of a good ecologically-situated life, but recognized the danger of a narrow, parochialist stance which might not be sufficient to understand ecological effects and relationships in the larger global community (75, 77). In her landmark book *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet* (2008), Ursula Heise has convincingly argued for an “eco-cosmopolitan” approach to literary and cultural studies which acknowledges and explores how environments, be they social or natural, are always already part of larger global movements. Borders between nations or between species, for example, are social constructions and, as such, permeable and changeable. The research of these scholars elucidates the complex relations of various social and natural phenomena, the networks of dynamic players, human and non-human, material and immaterial. The nonhuman environment is understood as full of conflict and change because of its own dynamics *and* because it has always been shaped by

human cultures – always meaning from the very beginning of humanity. Such an assumption disrupts notions of an essentialized, pristine nature “out there” and of geographically or culturally fixed, stable places. It also undermines ideas of some pristine human origin. Instead, we must assume intricate interrelations of a constantly changing, highly mobile *natureculture*, as Donna Haraway’s term so aptly reveals (Haraway).¹

All this points ecocritics to the question of how nature is part of the mobilities paradigm. What are the consequences if we take the idea of mobility as connected to power geometries and to a progressive sense of place into consideration? What happens when we realize that mobility is not only “socially produced motion,” but also a part of larger natural forces? What networks of relation become visible in floods, mudslides, toxic clouds, or in the migration of animals and plants? How are these a part of the Anthropocene? In the following I will read Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Hungry Tide* as an apt literary example of nature and of people being on the move. I will demonstrate how mobility in the text is not only socially constructed and the result of political and economic power structures, but that it is also a phenomenon of nature’s agentic quality,² and that both aspects of mobility mingle in important ways.

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*: Nature and Culture on the Move

Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) raises issues of migration, mobility, place and identity in a number of intricately interwoven themes and topics. It connects the movement of people, the land and water, plants and animals, ideas and myths and other agents, and highlights their relatedness and reciprocal influence. Most of the action takes place in the Sundarbans, on a small island called Lusibari, which is part of the Ganges delta in Bangladesh. In the fictional world of the novel it seems that everything and everyone is on the move or lives in the Sundarbans because of some recent or historically distant movement due, for example, to climatic, political, economic, ecological, scientific, or personal reasons. Critics have written extensively on the transcultural engagement of the protagonists (Rajender Kaur), on transnational border-crossings in the context of migration (Pablo Mukherjee), on the novel as a green

¹ For a more detailed introduction to ecocriticism and mobility studies see Christine Gerhardt and Christa Grewe-Volpp.

² My argument follows the new materialist understanding of matter not as inert substance, but as possessing “its own modes of self-transformation, self-organization, and directedness” (Coole and Frost 10).

postcolonial text (Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin), on rural or “territorialized cosmopolitanism” (Emily Johansen) and, last but not least, on eco-cosmopolitan encounters and the development of an eco-cosmopolitan consciousness (Alexa Weik). These literary critics deal with the multifaceted aspects of the local and the global and their complex interconnections. This essay will pay special attention to the meanings of cultural and natural mobility in a text which, although dealing with one particular place, is very aware of its connections to a globalized world. It will reveal the imbrications of a dynamic natural environment and a socio-political development in a constantly evolving process.

Mobility is a defining feature of Lusibari and the Sundarbans. For instance, the geography of this place alone – a mighty river delta with many channels and thousands of islands, a large archipelago which changes constantly with the ebb and tide of the sea, creating new land, swallowing it up and recreating land again, making the border between land and water highly unstable – makes it a very rich ecosystem because of the co-existence of sweet and salt water, which are incessantly mixed in the movement of the river and the tide. As the waters don’t intermingle evenly, “variations of salinity and turbidity” have contributed to the creation of many balloon-like biodomes with a larger diversity of flora and fauna (such as more species of fish, for example) than on the whole European continent (125). Small animals like crabs have helped to build the geographical and biological features of the Sundarbans. Nirmal, the deceased uncle of Kanai, one of the main protagonists of the novel, calls the crabs “the keystone species of the entire ecosystem” (142) because, “they kept the mangroves alive by removing their leaves and litter; without them the trees would choke on their own debris” (142).

Nirmal sees not only the current ecological structure of the place, but also its beginnings in “the deep, deep time of geology” when, a hundred and forty million years ago, the subcontinent broke away from Antarctica and moved north, pushing up the Himalayas. He further explained how “in the deep time of geology” the river Ganges emerged and began to flow towards the ocean (181). These scientific facts correspond with another, mythological version of the river. In this version, as told by Nirmal, the Goddess Ganga descended from heaven and moved across the continent in a mighty torrent. Shiva, it is said, tamed this torrent by braiding the Goddess’s hair (the stream) “into an immense rope of water” and then, finally, he undid the braid and let her hair flow freely in the delta, creating an “immense archipelago of islands” in the process (6, 7). Other natural phenomena sweeping over the landscape are cyclones and floods that hit the Sundarbans every so often, bringing destruction and death. And yet,

the flora has adapted to this region. The mangrove forests, for example, serve as a protection against the violent storms as they can withstand the waves and reappear after having been inundated. The cyclones do not only contribute to the character of the place, they literally make it. We can see how geographical, geological, ecological and atmospheric movement is an essential part of this small place in Bangladesh, which can be interpreted from a scientific or a mythological point of view, both of them valid in different, specific ways.

Migrating animals also play an important part in *The Hungry Tide*, especially the river dolphins, or *Orcaella brevirostris*. They move to various locations in the Ganges and are, at the same time, the cause of other people's journeys. Piya, a cetologist from the United States with Bengali roots, has traveled to the Sundarbans to study the fresh-water dolphins with her sophisticated technical equipment (there are also coastal dolphins who live in the salt water). She is concerned about them because they have become "a rare and dwindling breed" (123). Their disappearance is not only caused by fast-moving boats: it is also believed to be the result of a drastic change in their established habitat (266, 267) – possibly a change in atmospheric pressure which dolphins are very sensitive to. Of course, an anthropogenic influence, the rise of sea level as an effect of global warming, is only alluded to. The dolphin's migration is an essential, but increasingly precarious part of their species behavior, because it is disturbed by man-made alterations. The animals are vulnerable to modern technology and other forms of modern civilization, which lead to their decimation. Their plight is one of several examples of how the geometries of power in the mobilities paradigm can prove to be dangerous and even fatal.

The Sundarbans are not only shaped by natural phenomena, but to a very large extent by political events, be they colonial, national or global, which caused the migration of politically persecuted or displaced people. Most of the social movement in the novel can be traced back to the end of British colonialism in 1947 and the partition of India. In Bengal, thousands of Bengali Hindus, mostly poor people and Untouchables, were displaced from what became East Pakistan. They were forced to flee and search for new homes, a topic which becomes one prominent narrative strand in *The Hungry Tide*. Other migrants include cosmopolitans like Piya and Kanai, or idealists like Nirmal and his wife Nilima, as I will show below. Alexa Weik sees the multifaceted influence of postcolonialism as so determining for the protagonists in the novel that she calls "the postcolonial migrant as such, in her different incarnations delineated by class, caste, and nationality" a "paradigmatic character" (125).

Who are these migrants and why did they choose the Sundarbans as their home? Ghosh not only focuses on migration caused by the partition of India, he also alludes to British colonialists who of course had not been forced to migrate, but came with their own visions of the subcontinent. Nirmal, one of the main protagonists, whose diary gives his nephew (and the reader) access to the Sundarbans's past, describes the colonialists as ignorant of the local conditions of the country. His primary and representative example is Sir Daniel Hamilton, a well-intentioned social idealist, who wanted to create a classless and casteless society in the early 20th century. To this end, he promised free land to all people who were willing to work and who agreed to disregard the caste system (51). They came by the thousands, hacking away at the mangrove forests, creating a space for themselves, despite the danger of being eaten by tigers and crocodiles or killed by snakes. But, according to Nirmal, the tide country was not ready for Sir Daniel's ideas because they had very little to do with the local conditions of Bengal, its social organization as well as its exposure to cyclones. The hard working people remained poor because their land was often inundated by storms that rendered the soil infertile for several years at a time. In "[...] Lusibari hunger and catastrophe were a way of life" (79). The local people's mobility is thus socially produced by larger economic and political forces that led to social injustice, poverty and, time after time, to displacement.

Another blatant example of enforced migration is the appearance of refugees on the small island of Morichjhāpi in the tide country. They were mostly Dalits, or Untouchables, originally from East Pakistan, who had been evicted from their homes in the Ganges delta and resettled in various parts of India after the 1971 War of Independence. This war was a bloody rebellion of Bengali nationalists, which resulted in the foundation of the state of Bangladesh. But, as one of the refugees, Kusum, says, they could not live in their newly designated places, because "rivers ran in our heads, the tides were in our blood" (165). They moved back to the Sundarbans, which finally proved to be fatal for them. At first supported by the Left Front, the refugees were eventually abandoned, their settlement was declared illegal, and they were forcibly removed from Morichjhāpi in 1978 – systematically raped, killed and expelled (Murkherjee 149). Resettling on the island, they had tried to realize Sir Daniel's dream of a classless society in the late 1970s. In the novel *Nirmal*, himself a political idealist, observed a utopian society in the making, and tried enthusiastically to be of use among them after his own retirement. This time, it seems, the people could have succeeded had the government not

stepped in and expelled them cruelly and forcefully, killing hundreds in the name of justice.

Justice in this case refers to Project Tiger, a conservation program initiated by the Indian government during Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's administration in 1973 (see Kaur 139). This project, funded among others by the WWF, aimed at protecting the tiger as an endangered species in its natural habitat. In the novel the refugees live in a place designated as a protected area for the Royal Bengal tiger, on Morichjhāpi, therefore their settlement is declared illegal. Of course the tiger is an endangered animal that needs protection, but the question that arises is whether the people who had learned to live with the tiger (although many of them were killed each year) were less valuable. The juxtaposition of animals versus humans establishes a false polarity, as Kusum points out: "Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them" (261, 262)? Project Tiger and the Morichjhāpi massacre expose the geometries of power in the mobility of ideas. Western concepts of environmentalism (here of the WWF) clash with the needs of the local population in Bengal.³ The results of this clash must be read as a critique of globalization and its darker consequences, which are often elided in celebratory discourses about nature conservation, as Kavita Daya claims (qtd. in Mukherjee 148).

In the novel, not all people who moved to the Sundarbans are as unfortunate as the refugees of Morichjhāpi. Nirmal and his wife Nilima, for example, left Calcutta in the 1950s because Nirmal, an intellectual leftist, needed to escape political harassment and a very uncertain professional future. He had participated in a conference of the Socialist International in Calcutta which was seen by the political parties in power as a decisive event for major Asian uprisings, "the Vietnamese insurrection, the Malayan insurgency, the Red Flag rebellion in Burma" (77). Although he was only detained for two days, the event unnerved him and he decided to move to a more remote area on the map of the Indian subcontinent, knowing full well that he cannot totally escape from history and isolate himself from global forces. In Lusibari, he became the principal of the only school, whereas Nilima, "ever practical" (80), founded the Women's Union and the Babadon Trust, out of which grew a hospital, workshops, offices, and a guest house (82). Nirmal and Nilima represent the national Indians in the novel who stay within their country, but move to a different area with their ideas and social engagement to

³ For a critical assessment of Western environmentalism in the Third World see Ramachandra Guha.