

# **Transatlantic Dialogues on the Environment**

First Conference of the Transatlantic Research Network in the Environmental Humanities  
University of Washington  
September 28-29, 2012

## **Conference Sponsors:**

Simpson Center for the Humanities  
Department of English, UW  
Department of Germanics, UW  
Alexander von Humboldt Foundation

## **Locations:**

CMU 120, CMU 202, CMU 204, Denny 308  
<http://www.washington.edu/maps>

## **Conference Program**

**Friday, September 28, 2012**

**8:45 am – 10:15 am, CMU 202**

**Session I: Exploring Western Spaces**

Moderator: Linda Nash (UW, History)

Caroline Schaumann (Emory, German):

From European Sublime to American Swashbuckler:

Clarence King's Exploration of the Sierra Nevada

Amos Nascimento (UW Tacoma, Philosophy):

Karl Wittfogel and the Geography of the US Southwest

**10:15 am – 10:30 am, CMU 204**

Coffee

**10:30 am – 12:00 pm, CMU 202**

**Session II: Troping the Wild**

Moderator: Stevan Harrell (UW, Anthropology)

Gary Handwerk (UW, English):

Transfiguring the Wilderness: Robinson Crusoe's Dispiriting Nature

Christoph Irmscher (IU, American Studies):  
Natural History Illustrations and Ecology: Agassiz, Darwin, Haeckel, Audubon

**12:00 pm– 1:00 pm, UW Club Conference Room**

Lunch for conference presenters, invited guests, and members of HI-NORM (Human Interactions and Normativity) cluster

**1:15 pm – 2:45 pm, Denny 308 (Rey Library)**

**Session III: Ecology in Contemporary Literature and Film I**

Moderator: Brigitte Prutti (UW, Germanics)

Wolfgang Struck (Erfurt, German):

Nature's State? Environmentalism and Neo-colonial Fantasies in Post-WW II Germany

Gabriele Dürbeck (Vechta, German):

The Good, the Ugly and the Ridicule: Ecologists in Contemporary Literature

**2:45 pm – 3:15 pm, Denny 308**

Coffee

**3:15 pm – 4:45 pm, Denny 308**

**Session IV: Ecology in Contemporary Literature and Film II**

Moderator: Richard Block (UW, Germanics)

Sabine Noellgen (UW, Germanics):

The Darkness of the Anthropocene: A Comparative Reading of Werner Herzog's *Lektionen in Finsternis* and Wolfgang Hilbig's *Alte Abdeckerei*

Sabine Frost (Erfurt, Cultural Studies):

"Ecocentric Identification": Drawing Lines by Transgressing them in Contemporary Fiction

**5:30 pm, CMU 120**

Introduction of Speaker: Thomas Lekan (U South Carolina, History)

**Keynote**

Bernhard Malkmus (Ohio State, German):

Geography and Landscape *Stimmung*

**6:45 pm – 8:15 pm, CMU 204**

Reception for Conference Presenters and invited Participants  
Sponsored by the Department of English

**Saturday, September 29:**

**9:30 am – 11:45 am, CMU 202**

**Session V: Environmental Ethics and Climate**

Moderator: Rich Watts (UW, French & Italian)

Sean Ireton (U Missouri, German):

Toward a Cross-Cultural Environmental Ethics: Hans Jonas and Aldo Leopold

Axel Goodbody (Univ. of Bath, German):

Climate Change in Contemporary German Fiction

Sabine Wilke (UW, Germanics):

Configurations of Climate Change in Science, Culture, and Society:

Negotiating German Culture in an Age of Environmentalism

**12:00 pm – 1:00 pm, CMU 204**

Lunch for conference presenters, invited guests, and members of the UW environmental humanities reading group

**1:00 pm – 2:30 pm, CMU 204**

**Session VI: Narrating Catastrophe**

Moderator: Lauren Hartzell Nichols (UW, Philosophy)

Katharina Gerstenberger (Univ. of Utah, German):

“Störfälle”: From Chernobyl to Fukushima

Richard T. Gray (UW, Germanics):

Narrating Environmental Catastrophe:

Ecopsychology, Natural History of Destruction, and W. G. Sebald’s “Corsica” Project

**2:30 pm – 3:00 pm, CMU 204**

Coffee

**3:00 pm – 4:00 pm CMU 120**

**Workshop on Posthumanism**

Thomas Lekan (U South Carolina): Provincializing Ecology: From Wild Spaces to Hybrid Landscapes in Postcolonial Environmental Studies

Heather Sullivan (Trinity): Ecological Posthumanism: Goethe and Beyond

**4:15 pm – 5:00 pm CMU 202**

**Session VII: Planning Future Collaborations and Publications**

(network participants only)

**6:00 pm – 9:00 pm**

Reception for Conference Presenters and invited Participants

Sponsored by the Department of Germanics

Location tba

## **Abstracts and Project Descriptions:**

**Gabriele Dürbeck**

### **The Good, the Ugly and the Ridicule: Ecologists in Contemporary Literature**

The paper analyses specific characters in contemporary environmental prose. Assuming that environmental literature often depicts rather schematic characters with a steady set of information, this paper is part of a broader attempt to develop a typology of ‘ecologists’. In particular, the paper addresses the question which characters and role models have the potential to convince the audience and have the potential to become a permanent image. The paper combines ecocritical and narratological perspectives. In narratology, more rounded concepts of character and characterisation have been developed in recent years. According to this approach, characters are entities in the narrated world which are composed of general assumptions about human nature and cultural knowledge. To this, social-ecological relations need to be added.

Distinguishing one-dimensional from multidimensional characters the paper analyses a spectrum of narrative strategies for characterisation that stretches from personification, character model (type) and individual character. It explores how personal characteristics result from explicit or implicit attributions, figural schemes as well as situational schemes and how relations between character and reader are constructed. I demonstrate how the conception of characters is orientated toward the reader’s emotional perception (e.g. sympathy/antipathy) and his/her assessment derived from historical, cultural and ecological criteria. Finally, I examine the narrative functions performed by different characters in the context of the two dominant narrative patterns in eco-literature: catastrophic (apocalyptic) rhetoric and risk narrative. In particular, I will discuss the assumption that eco-thriller are driven by action, suspense, a conventional story line and rather schematic characters (often natural scientists) whereas risk narratives often employ more complex diegesis with more differentiated characters.

**Katharina Gerstenberger**

The project, tentatively titled “**Disaster Narratives: History and Catastrophe in the German Imagination**,” is a book-length study of German and Austrian disaster texts from the late 19th century to the present. The selected texts explore particular historical moments by telling stories of disasters and, frequently, use these incidents to call into question the nation’s or the community’s assumptions about itself. Of particular interest to the Environmental Humanities will be the sections on natural disasters, which include texts on the 1883 Krakatau eruption and the 2004 tsunami, as well as those on the 1986 Chernobyl disaster. My main interest is the cultural aspects contained in disaster narratives and the implications for individual and society suggested by the authors.

**Gary Handwerk**

### **Before Today: On the Culture-Historical Background to Contemporary Environmental Attitudes**

The agenda set by Lynn White's essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Present Ecologic Crisis," is, if anything, more compelling today than when that essay was first published in 1966: the ecological crises we face potentially worse, anti-ecological perspectives even more deeply embedded in the ideological framework of many contemporary political perspectives, the task of understanding those historical roots and sharing that understanding across societies globally accomplished in only the most preliminary of ways. Literary and cultural studies lag behind even environmental history in this regard, though their role in seeking to reframe environmental values is equally fundamental. This project begins with a simple methodological premise: that literary-cultural texts, like works of art generally, are not simply descriptive accounts of what particular authors see or feel. They are acts of persuasion, implicit arguments about how the intended audience should think and feel and behave that are often all the more effective for the implicitness of their positions. Such texts play an important role in determining how societies think about environmental issues; they help shape the deep base of beliefs and values that frame political debates about public policies. Tracing the historical evolution of environmental attitudes and analyzing the strategies through which certain attitudes gain traction (or fail to do so) are therefore crucial steps in apprehending how and why we find ourselves in many ways in an ecological impasse, heightened by the Great Recession of 2008, at a moment when environmental awareness is self-evidently more important for the human race than ever before.

Beginning, then, with the early modernity of the eighteenth-century, this project will trace from that era through the present the historical roots of our own ecological crises. I begin with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (British Calvinism as a particular offshoot of Christianity), look next at Rousseau (Romantic views on nature), take up the nineteenth-century intersections between Darwin's theory of evolution and Nietzsche's uneasy naturalizing of his theory of power, examine Faulkner's rendering of the parallel construal of nature and race in the twentieth-century American South, and conclude with an account of some late twentieth-century science fiction perspectives on nature (Philip K. Dick, Octavia Butler, Kim Stanley Robinson).

**Sean Ireton**

### **Toward a Cross-Cultural Environmental Ethics: Hans Jonas and Aldo Leopold**

The German-Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas studied under Heidegger during the 1920s but left his homeland when the Nazis came to power. In 1979 he published his landmark book *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, in which he painstakingly worked out a new system of ethics. Whereas previous moral codes have regulated interhuman behavior (e.g. the Judeo-Christian commandments and Kant's categorical imperative), Jonas seeks an ethical standard for humanity's conduct toward nature. His analysis offers a trenchant critique of philosophical anthropocentrism as well as of socialist utopianism and capitalist myopia, all of which remain blind to the dangers facing our planet. Nevertheless, a crucial fundamental question facing his philosophy is: To what extent does the principle of responsibility contain an inherent anthropogenic prejudice? In other words, does his imperative also have a general bioethical validity, one that extends to all life forms regardless of humanity's role or presence? How, for

instance, is the following precept to be interpreted: “Handle so, daß die Wirkungen deiner Handlung verträglich sind mit der Permanenz menschlichen Lebens auf Erden.” Does this maxim also extend to non-human entities, as for instance in the latest version of Ecuador’s constitution, which grants inalienable rights to *all* of nature? Here in the United States, Aldo Leopold remains a more influential moral spokesman for the environment. His classic essay “The Land Ethic” (first published in 1953) presents the same basic idea of acting responsibly toward nature, though the specifics of his argument are more scientific and ecological than philosophical and political. Nevertheless, both Leopold and Jonas reverse traditional Cartesian subjectivistic philosophy, divesting the rational ego of its instrumental supremacy and valorizing the rights of nature. My talk will examine the cross-cultural environmental-ethical implications of Jonas’s and Leopold’s conservationism, all the while establishing a transcontinental dialogue between the two.

**Thomas Lekan**

### **Provincializing Ecology: From Wild Spaces to Hybrid Landscapes in Postcolonial Environmental Studies**

This paper offers a critical genealogy of environmental history as it has emerged in North America and Europe in the past four decades, focusing especially on the implications of postcolonial studies for the way in which historians and other scholars interested in “post-humanism” use “ecology” as a conceptual and methodological tool. I analyze briefly key debates in the field that illustrate how early manifestos from the 1970s, which called for an ecological approach to history based on cybernetic and structuralist models from the natural sciences, gave way in the 1990s to thick descriptions of “hybrid landscapes” in which both human and non-human nature were always already contingent and historicized.

The paper focuses especially on recent debates over the fate of the Serengeti National Park, particularly the 2010 decision by the government of Tanzanian president Jakaya Kikwete to build a paved road through the park near the Kenyan border. This case study illustrates the way in which postcolonial systems of power, social identities, and cultural discourses shaped modern understandings of “nature” and catalyzed environmental movements in the twentieth century. Of the major non-governmental organizations (NGOs) protesting the government’s action, none was more vocal than the Frankfurt Zoological Society, whose former director, West German television star, filmmaker, and former federal conservation minister Bernhard Grzimek, had drawn the world’s attention to the plight of East Africa’s dwindling wildlife in his 1959 Oscar-winning documentary *Serengeti Shall Not Die*. Here I examine Grzimek’s contested legacy in East Africa, particularly his belief that “rhinos belong to everybody,” a universalist claim that served to delegitimize the customary land use and led to the dislocation of thousands of Maasai pastoralists whose activities had actually created the grasslands that sustained rather than endangered the large mammals in the savannas. With this case study, I show how postcolonial theories, particularly Gayatri Spivak’s concept of “epistemic violence,” have rendered Western “ecology” itself suspect as an epistemological foundation for environmental history and, indeed, for the humanities more broadly. Such theories lay bare the tensions between nature conservation and indigenous peoples in the in the Global South, where applied ecology has until

recently sought to colonize and displace vernacular forms of environmental knowledge in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Though ecology contributed to leveling humanity's place within the rest of nature in Western thought, a post-humanist history of hybrid landscapes must take the "provincializing" of ecology as an object of analysis, rather than its starting point.

**Bernhard Malkmus**

### **Geography and Landscape *Stimmung***

This paper engages with recent attempts to reinvigorate categories of space and spatiality in the humanities and their implications for an environmental approach to the humanities. I will contextualize these attempts within other modes of thinking that re-emphasize either the material nature of culture or the visceral nature of experience and thus can be broadly seen as counter-movements to semiotic theories of culture. I am particularly interested in highlighting the paradox at the heart of this "spatial turn": (a) the desire to (re)invest the humanities in the psychological, social and ecological realities of a time that has lost the naivety of post-historical rhetoric, and (b) the attempts to establish "space" as a new quasi-scientific master category "beyond" the humanities. I am seeking to explore the theoretical potentials and problems of "geographic materialism" and other facets of theorizing space by discussing seminal theoretical works and by pitching them against the complexity of the notion "landscape". The discussions about landscape, in particular about wilderness vs cultural landscape, during the nineteenth century will serve as a heuristic backdrop for testing the ideas and sustainability of the "spatial turn" in general.

**Sabine Noellgen:**

### **The Darkness of the Anthropocene: A Comparative Reading of Werner Herzog's *Lektionen in Finsternis* and Wolfgang Hilbig's *Alte Abdeckerei***

Wolfgang Hilbig's *Alte Abdeckerei*, published in 1991, and Werner Herzog's *Lektionen in Finsternis*, released in 1992, are works of art that have not yet brought in correspondence with each other. One a documentary film with genre-bending strategies of documentation, the other a short prose text by a non-canonized author who is typically dealt with as a "GDR-writer," these two works of art make an unlikely pair for a comparative analysis. Nonetheless, an environmentally oriented focus, which takes the changing parameters of life in the Anthropocene as a starting point, foregrounds surprising commonalities of Hilbig's text and Herzog's film. While commonly considered to be a new chapter in the Earth's geophysical history, in the contemporary environmental debate the Anthropocene has assumed a metaphorical value which points to humankind's aggression and excess. The one most prominent indicator for this new epoch, the beginning of which coincides with the rise of the industrial age, is the concentration of carbon dioxide in the global atmosphere, accelerated by the use of fossil fuels industrialization has set in motion. Both *Alte Abdeckerei* and *Lektionen in Finsternis* can be read as negotiations of the interdependencies of the use of fossil fuels and artistic expression, may it be literary and filmic. In both Hilbig's and Herzog's tales of man-made pollution, the Anthropocene is a dark age, which leaves a distinct mark on representational modes. While participating in the popular

apocalyptic genre, both works of art narrate a *tabula rasa*, yet offer a way out. Not surprisingly so, these exits point to a scenario in which the use of fossil fuels is no longer taking place.

**Caroline Schaumann:**

### **From European Sublime to American Swashbuckler: Clarence King's exploration of the Sierra Nevada**

This paper explores the impact of Alexander von Humboldt and other European scientists on the North American explorer Clarence King to examine King's representation of his adventures in the American West. King's own narrative of his travels, published in 1872 as *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada*, made the range known and palatable to the nation. Considered mainly from a historical perspective, some scholars continue to read this text as a chronological account of the events that happened, while others doubt its historical validity, pointing to the author's generous liberties and aberrations. Thus far, the book has received little attention as a literary text per se, even though its style reflects a highly original American-European convergence by introducing an imaginative and captivating mountaineering discourse to an educated East Coast audience.

**Heather I. Sullivan:**

### **Ecological Posthumanism**

Posthumanism currently follows two main directions: the "techno," or cyborg posthumanism of Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles, and the species posthumanism of animal studies guided by Haraway and Cary Wolfe. Both these posthumanisms reject the supreme position usually accorded to human beings in contrast to everything else in the biosphere. The techno-cyborg strand explores our interface with technology as a means of documenting our non-dualistic relations with our surroundings, whereas animal studies address both human beings as a biological species and our interactions with our "companion species," as Haraway writes. While humanism firmly draws lines around the rational individual subject positioned atop the assumed hierarchy of beings and things, posthumanism rejects the notion that we are primarily isolated and self-determining bodies. Posthumanism, in other words, puts us in the thick of things, bodies, machines, and other living beings.

Ecological posthumanism provides a third direction to the productive re-thinking of the human being; in addition to technological and species interfaces, this option looks at our biotic and abiotic environment as our inextricable milieu in the same way that the water is the milieu for fish. Such a view of ecological enmeshment has particular resonance during this time when climate change brings record droughts, heat, storms, fires, and weather events across the globe. It is similar to Louise Westling's proposal for a third form of posthumanism, one she describes as an "ecological ontology" based on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work. Human beings in this vision are immensely influential, but still only one of many "kindred species." In such a posthumanist view, "[w]e are no longer alone as transcendent Minds locked in decaying bodies on an Earth where we don't belong, and separate from the myriad creatures around us. Now we can see ourselves as vibrant bodies pulsing in harmony with our whole environment."<sup>1</sup> Although I am more skeptical than Westling regarding the "pulsing harmony" of our "vibrant bodies" with our "whole environment" (indeed, one basic necessity of life is its requisite ability to delineate itself

from its surroundings sufficiently enough to have its own rhythms, temperature, and chemical content), I nevertheless follow her proposal to add a third option for posthumanism based on ecological considerations. Ecological posthumanism documents our material exchanges with our material and cultural surroundings. The air that we breathe, water we drink, and institutions we occupy all have a physical impact on us, as our actions do on them. It is a matter of reciprocally enabling conditions, as Val Plumwood writes in *Environmental Culture* (2002). Our bodies are physical sites of exchanges with others humans as well as other species and technology, and they are also nodes of intense ecological agency including consumption, production, and the inevitable merge with the elements (water, air, nutrients, energy, etc.). In fact, human culture itself must now be considered a prime agent in shaping—or damaging—ecological systems: this is the spectrum for ecological posthumanism that contextualizes our bodies and cultures within the environments we inhabit and alter.

This project assesses various literary portrayals from Goethe and the romantics to Karen Duve in order to provide a range of humanistic and potentially posthumanist visions of human beings in terms of material interactions with the biotic and abiotic milieu. Although posthumanism offers a radical rethinking of humanity with the hopes that green contextualization will diminish our destructive hubris, these German texts neatly suggest that human and environmental processes are more interwoven than we typically acknowledge but also that our anthropocentric consumption of land and life is not just a recent cultural trend arriving with modernity. Ecological posthumanism looks at the current environmental circumstances with a long-term perspective including Faustian air travel and Duve's taxi-driving protagonist (in *Taxi* 2008) crisscrossing Hamburg in the seemingly meaningless meanderings of modern transport burning fuel but leading nowhere—except, of course, to the Laundromat. These modern landscapes emerge from the literature as a maze of ongoing motion and change that are blind—literally in the case of Faust—to their long-term material and environmental impact. Recognizing the flaws of humanism through the insight that we are environmentally enmeshed is the broad goal of ecological posthumanism; yet these texts from the German tradition offer no false hopes for promethean conquering of our own actions within a world that ever draws us onward (or “*zieht uns hinan*”). Indeed, the most significant contribution of an ecological posthumanism may be the task of learning to see human beings more clearly in our gritty context rather than aspiring to transcend it or ourselves—these are, after all, inseparable.

**Sabine Wilke:**

### **Narrating Climate: German Culture in the Age of Environmentalism**

Narrating climate constructs a historical framework for understanding discourses on environmental change as the result of transactions and negotiations between global forms of imagining a shared sense of (world) community and local models of regional politics. The German environmental imagination was born in the context of scientific discovery (Alexander von Humboldt) and continues to shape fictional narratives of climate and climate change today. The trajectory of this discursive construct spans two hundred years of literary and rhetorical figurations of the figure of the German scientist actively involved in global transactions, researching atmospheric phenomena and other scientific parameters related to climate, translating these data visually into mathematical models, charts, images, and projections, and lecturing about his/her conclusions (often in other

languages and to an international audience), effectively positioning German science at the forefront of advocacy for climate-related issues, at the same time sidestepping, in triangulated fashion, the specific issues related to German history, the history of European colonialism, the nature of environmental determinism and its relation to the German tradition.

For Alexander von Humboldt, climate refers to all changes in the atmosphere that noticeably affect our organs, our feelings, and our mental condition. In his work on Latin America and Central Asia, he narrates local climate conditions from the perspective of the male European subject from a temperate climate who is visiting these locals and who is writing up the conclusions of his research for a European audience. While Alexander von Humboldt's comparative climatology and the narrative discourse on climate that he develops in his case studies on the landscapes of Central Asia links local socio-cultural practices to a global imaginary, the modern narrative of anthropogenic climate change foregrounds the human actor and displaces Humboldt's focus on larger atmospheric phenomena and geographic coordinates.

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<sup>i</sup> Louise Westling. "Literature, the environment, and the question of the posthuman," *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism*, eds. Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006, pg. 36.