



GERMAN ECOCRITICISM IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

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Literatures, Cultures, and the Environment

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German Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene

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Preface: The Anthropocene and the Challenge of Cultural Difference

Ursula K. Heise

Over the last decade, the concept of the Anthropocene has imposed itself as a new framework for thinking and writing about environmental issues. The idea that humans have so pervasively reshaped global ecological systems that their impact will be visible in the geological strata to future observers, and that this transformation has ushered in a new geological epoch, has influenced environmental debates about ecological science, policies, and environmental narratives and cultures. Regardless of whether geologists will end up accepting or rejecting the term, the Anthropocene has turned humankind at large into the protagonist of a new deep-time narrative, generated heated debates over the merits of such a species narrative as opposed to an emphasis on economic and geopolitical inequality, and given rise to controversies over what kind of nature environmentalism should aim to conserve in this new framework.

For environmentally oriented scholars of literature and culture, in particular, framing ecological issues through the idea of the Anthropocene raises the question of how much historical, cultural, and linguistic differences matter any longer. A great deal of scholarship in the humanities and qualitative social sciences over the last few decades has focused on the

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exploration of cultural differences and hybridities. Should such differences continue to structure our analysis and understanding of the world, or do the global scenarios of change and risk implicit in the notion of the Anthropocene make them shrink in significance? Do pervasive toxification, biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, and climate change, to name just a few of the most important ecological challenges that all human societies currently face, relegate questions of cultural difference to the backburner? Or are divergent historical traditions and cultural modes of understanding on the contrary relevant or even essential for understanding how different communities navigate processes of ecological change?

These are the questions that environmentally oriented research in the humanities under the sign of the Anthropocene has to engage with, especially when it focuses on a particular regional, national, or linguistic arena, as this volume does. In the case of German ecocriticism—environmentally oriented literary research that focuses on the literatures of Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, that is—the answers to these questions are far from straightforward. Ecocriticism, as Caroline Schaumann and Heather Sullivan point out in their introduction, gradually established itself as a subfield of American and British literary studies in the 1990s. When it migrated to the study of other regions and languages, roughly from the turn of the millennium onward, the transfer was often catalyzed either by Americanists working outside the United States or by specialists in languages other than English who worked at anglophone universities. German ecocriticism, following this pattern, was first practiced by Germanists working in England or the United States and only began to be adopted by Germanists in Germany somewhat later.

In the process, many parallels as well as some basic differences emerged between American and German environmental literature and politics. Germany, like England and the United States, has a rich literary tradition that engages with nature in general and, since the Romantic Age, with nature at risk from human intervention in particular. But this tradition does not include the genre of “nature writing,” nonfiction prose about environmental issues, at anything near the scale and cultural importance that it has in the United States, where it reaches from Henry David Thoreau to Terry Tempest Williams (Goodbody 13). Many tropes from the literary and cultural tradition of engagement with nature in Germany, moreover, were co-opted by the Nazi regime in the 1930s and 1940s, and during the same time period, literary engagements with nature tended to become an evasion of pressing political problems (Emmerich). Bertolt

Brecht famously exclaimed in his poem “An die Nachgeborenen” (To Those Born After), published in 1939: “Was sind das für Zeiten, wo/Ein Gespräch über Bäume fast ein Verbrechen ist/Weil es ein Schweigen über so viele Untaten einschließt!” (What times are these, when/A conversation about trees is almost a crime/Because it implies silence about so many misdeeds). Environmental writers in Germany in the 1960s and 1970s, therefore, unlike their counterparts in the United States, had to reclaim the literature of nature from the dual suspicion of right-wing co-optation and escapism. Christoph Buch, as editor of an issue of the literary magazine *Tintenfisch* dedicated to the new environmental literature in 1977, made this point emphatically by arguing that given the current ecological crises, it was “almost a crime *not* to talk about trees” (Buch; translation mine).

The rhetoric of “sense of place,” in particular, so prominent in North American environmentalist thought, is considerably more complicated in German environmental discourse. In an American tradition that runs from Thoreau to Aldo Leopold and Wendell Berry, knowledge of and commitment to a particular locale is a prerequisite for environmental ethics. *Heimat*, the home place or homeland and perhaps the closest equivalent to “place” in this context, plays an important role in German culture, including German environmental thought: in 1897 the composer Ernst Rudorff used the term *Heimatschutz* (homeland protection), which had military connotations, to coin the new concept of *Naturschutz* (nature protection or, more idiomatically in English, environmental conservation; Linsé 19–20). But in the aftermath of World War II, *Heimat* appeared doubly tainted by its association with a bourgeois tradition that many environmentalists, inspired by the countercultural movements of the 1960s, had no desire to associate themselves with and by its abuse in Nazi propaganda focused on reconnecting to “blood and soil.” Developing a politically progressive framework for contemporary concerns about *Heimat* remains an incomplete project (Körner 406 and 423–34). In German environmental law, the notion of *Landschaft* (landscape) plays a central role that might seem comparable to the American emphasis on place, yet *Landschaft* in this context usually means humanly transformed landscapes that combine culture and nature rather than the wild landscapes that typically inspire conservation in the American context (Heise, *Imagining Extinction* Chap. 3). The sense of place that figures so prominently in a good deal of North American nature poetry, environmental fiction, and nonfiction prose, for these reasons, has only played a subordinate role in German environmental thought and writing (see Heise, *Sense of Place* Chap. 1).

Different historical horizons may also explain why one of the modes of American ecocriticism, narrative scholarship, has not to date caught on in German ecocriticism. Narrative scholarship, the combination of personal experiences with research findings in a storytelling framework, is of course not unique to ecocriticism in the United States. Under the labels of autobiographic criticism or autoethnography, it was also practiced in certain forms of feminist, ethnic, and identity scholarship. In ecocriticism, its particular aspiration was to ground the analysis of literary texts in the material experience of specific places and in some cases to approximate the blend of storytelling and factual reporting that characterizes a good deal of American nature writing (Thoreau's texts are often cited as the paradigm; see the contributions to "Narrative Scholarship"). This kind of academic writing was clearly crucial in the development of feminist scholarship in that it helped to unmask the masculinist presuppositions that often structured supposedly detached and objective research on the grounds that "the personal is the political," as a popular feminist slogan had it. But it has had less resonance in German environmentalism and ecocriticism, perhaps because German environmental thought and writing from the 1960s to the 1970s, as the historian Stefan Körner has argued, deliberately foregrounded ecological science as a way of establishing consensus about what might otherwise have turned out to be widely divergent attributions of meaning to nature and to places (406)—including meanings that the increasingly left-leaning environmentalist movement might not have found congenial. The combination of personal experience with environmental scholarship and politics that American ecocritics typically conceive of as a "grounding" of their analyses in lived interactions with the environment could, in this context, seem like risking loss of any shared ground.

Beyond such divergences of tropes, themes, and critical approaches, the cultural and political functions of environmental literature have evolved differently in Germany than in the United States. As Axel Goodbody, one of the pioneers of German ecocriticism, has pointed out, German environmental writers have generally been more reluctant than their American counterparts to take on explicit political leadership or prophetic and didactic pronouncements in their writing. Goodbody quotes Hans Magnus Enzensberger, a towering presence in the German literary scene in the second half of the twentieth century and one of the first to write poetry about looming environmental crises in the 1950s, who remarked after the death of Heinrich Böll in 1986 that the political authority of the writer had transitioned to other social institutions: "We have lost Heinrich Böll.

But instead, we have Amnesty [International] and Greenpeace” (quoted in Goodbody 15; translation mine). Perhaps even more importantly than such influential NGOs, Germany has a Green Party that in the 1980s started to become a significant presence in local and regional politics and in the 1990s came to form part of a governing coalition at the federal level. In the United States, by contrast, where no Green Party has attained comparable political power and where leftist politics has been limited to a much narrower institutional bandwidth, a good deal of leftist politics from the 1960s to the early 2000s channeled itself into literature, art, humanistic scholarship, and food movements (including the “locavore” revival of place rhetoric). Taking their cue from the British scholar Stuart Hall, practitioners of Cultural Studies, for example, saw scholarship and teaching as “politics by other means” (Hall 12). Analogously, ecocritics, at least during the first wave of ecocritical scholarship, saw their work as an extension of environmental activism into the academy. In Germany, where an active social movement and an increasingly influential political party integrated environmental concerns into political debate at all levels, such an extension—or perhaps displacement—of environmental politics into literature and literary scholarship was not similarly urgent.¹

Such differences notwithstanding, there is of course a lot of shared ground between German and American environmental culture in general and ecocriticism in particular. American ecocriticism has been influenced by European philosophy and sociology ranging from the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger and the deep ecology of Arne Naess to theorizations of the risk society in Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck. German ecocriticism draws not only on American ecocriticism, as many of the contributions in this volume show, but also and above all on a shared body of concepts and theoretical paradigms, such as new materialism, risk criticism, disaster studies, dark ecology, and food studies, which are here deployed to analyze distinctive national canons and traditions in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. The debates about the Anthropocene by now form part of this body of shared theories, even though in the German context, with its history of thinking of natural landscapes as already culturally shaped, the idea that there is no realm of nature separate from human transformation may seem less innovative and surprising than it does in the context of the American emphasis on wilderness as that which is “untrammelled by man,” in the well-known phrase of the 1964 Wilderness Act. But precisely by providing a vocabulary that is relatively new and less inflected by distinctive national and cultural frameworks

than terms such as *Heimat*, *Landschaft*, wilderness, or sense of place, the Anthropocene may be well-suited to provide a platform on which shared ecological risks as well as cultural differences can be discussed.

NOTE

1. This does not mean, obviously, that German environmental writers and academics have not in some cases been extremely active in politics: the novelist and essayist Carl Amery, for example, was also a founding member of the Green Party. But it does mean that literature and scholarship need not function as an alternate sphere of politics in the absence of a space for environmental discussion in political institutions, as they sometimes have in the United States.

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Introduction

Caroline Schaumann and Heather I. Sullivan

How do we approach, read, discuss, and teach German literature in light of the transnational and global environmental problems and crises caused by human activities? In what way does the current geological era of the Anthropocene marked by traceable human impact across the globe lead us to reflect on the role and interconnectedness of human and non-human forces? Since human activities and human cultures have caused so many of the current ecological problems, how can scholars address broad-scale interdisciplinary problems with attention to both cultural and scientific knowledge? What is the role of the humanities in this inextricably nature-culture mix of problems? Many recent works in American and Anglophone literature attempt to answer such questions, yet there is still much to be done in other language and cultural traditions, especially when considering such broad-scale and shared challenges. We were motivated by such a need to gather together a collection of current work reflecting environmental attention in both canonical and non-canonical German-language texts and films.

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Addressing the growing need for environmental awareness in an international humanities curriculum, our book is one of the first to complement ecocritical analyses emerging from North American and British studies with a specifically German studies perspective. It is our goal to provide, on the one hand, ecocritical models for German studies and, on the other, an introduction to environmental issues in German literature and film for a broader audience. Thus, our anthology serves scholars and students in German studies and those interested in ecocriticism and the environmental humanities, as well as readers seeking a more international and transnational understanding of how culture and literature engage contemporary political, environmental, and economic issues. By offering a critical investigation into cultural performances of “nature” in German-speaking literature and film from the late eighteenth century into the present, it is our hope that *German Ecocriticism* will help establish a specifically German-focused scholarship not only in examining the relationship between text and physical environment but also in producing a volume that connects to other language and culture traditions in the field.

Ecocriticism can generally be defined as the study of texts with attention to the physical environment. Ecocriticism thus investigates the cultural and physical interactions of human beings and other species in—and with—their environments. It thereby contributes critical and historical insights for current global debates on such broad-ranging topics as climate change, pollution, energy, urban development, the possible roles of technology for ecology, and environmental justice. Ecocriticism emerged out of literary scholarship in the Western United States with an early focus on “nature writing,” “wilderness,” environmental activism combining scholarship and political perspectives much like feminism and post-colonialism, and texts depicting the possibilities of more sustainable agriculture systems and other land practices. The field has expanded over the past 30 years through four “waves” of development and expansion toward much greater inclusivity leading to what is now an international area of study with many dedicated journals, academic positions in ecocriticism and the environmental humanities, and the formation of ecocritical societies across the globe. These four waves, as defined by Pippa Marland and Scott Slovic, are broadening the field from American nature writing to international explorations of such diverse areas as post-humanism, ecofeminism, animal studies, catastrophe theory, risk theory, the new materialisms and material ecocriticism, green post-colonialism, as well as ecological film and genre studies, among others. With increasing environmental knowledge

about the changing ecological circumstances in the wake of human industrial and agricultural activities, ecocriticism has also directed its attention to such topics as global pollution, food studies, the changing climate, and the sixth great extinction brought about by human activity (Kolbert). The expanding of the environmental humanities and ecocriticism specifically toward national, transnational, and even “planetary” perspectives demonstrates the need for collaborative scholarship across the continents that looks both locally and globally at diverse cultures and texts from an ecological perspective.¹ The essays in *German Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene* contribute to this larger project by not only highlighting various perspectives from German-speaking authors and texts but also situating these views in reference to the existing English and Anglophone scholarship as well as other traditions.

In order to provide a frame for the broad-ranging topics and authors included in the volume, we contextualize the texts and analyses in terms of the Anthropocene. Current geo-physical research and stratigraphic studies indicate that we have entered a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, when human impact has left industrial traces across the surface of the entire planet. Debates in 2016 will decide if scientists will claim that the Holocene, the geological era that began after the last Ice Age, is over, eclipsed by the Anthropocene. Regardless of these decisions, the term of the Anthropocene as the era of (large-scale) human impact has gained such currency culturally that it has become widely accepted across many disciplines. Among those who agree on the name and concept, the specific timeframe of the Anthropocene nevertheless remains contested. It was first formulated by Nobel Laureate Paul Crutzen (atmospheric chemistry) and his colleague Eugene Stoermer in 2000 for the scientific journal *Nature*, when they denoted it as the epoch beginning in the Industrial Revolution around 1770 with the steam engine.² While addressing current concerns of the Anthropocene thematically rather than chronologically, our volume roughly follows this timeframe beginning with Goethe and the Romantics and extending into the present, thus offering a range of examples from the eighteenth through the twenty-first century. Instead of concentrating only on contemporary texts that self-consciously address environmental challenges in the wake of increased reliance on fossil fuels, urbanization, globalization, and climate change, we seek to expand the frame of inquiry by studying works from the broader Anthropocene spectrum, as it is most commonly defined, in order to understand the manifold cultural frames and ideas about nature-culture as the era unfolds. Fittingly, some of the

pioneers of German ecocriticism in North America, the United Kingdom, and Germany—Ursula Heise, Axel Goodbody, and Gabriele Dürbeck—have the first and last words in this volume. While Heise highlights some specific challenges of the Anthropocene in different cultural contexts, Goodbody calls on the tasks of the humanities, and in particular literature, to contribute to contemporary environmental challenges such as climate change in the Anthropocene, and Dürbeck investigates the opportunities and pitfalls of Anthropocene ecotrillers as a genre that raises many of the most crucial ecological questions today. Indeed, genre fiction generally, including science fiction and mysteries, provides some of the most well-known examples of texts attempting to imagine and narrate a world of climate change and other ecological crises such as oils spills, extraction of new and old energy sources, and, most of all, planetary changes that will impact human beings and other species upon which we depend.

Even though environmental thinking, philosophy, and grassroots activism boast of an important and long-standing tradition in German culture from Alexander von Humboldt to Martin Heidegger as well as the Green Party, literary ecocriticism arrived in Germany after burgeoning first in American and British studies. Early explorations in ecocriticism thus did not resonate as much in German studies as the more recent expansions. In his essay “German Ecocriticism: An Overview,” Axel Goodbody poignantly addresses this issue:

Why has it [ecocriticism] yet to gain wider recognition as a field of literary study in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, countries in whose philosophy and cultural tradition nature features so prominently, whose people are shown by international surveys of public opinion to show a high degree of environmental concern, and where environmental issues rank consistently high on the political agenda? (547)

Goodbody himself provides two potential answers to this question, pointing (1) to the tradition of non-fiction writing embodied by many venerable German-speaking thinkers (Humboldt, Ernst Haeckel, Gernot and Hartmut Böhme, Ulrich Beck), artists (Friedensreich Hundertwasser, Joseph Beuys), and filmmakers (Werner Herzog), whose prolific works tend to overshadow those of German literary authors and (2) referring to the problematic fusion of Nazi ideology and an anti-modern approach to nature and belonging that continues to make discussions of German nature a loaded topic. As Heise elaborates in the preface to this volume,

a sense of place and local belonging that formed a founding element of environmental consciousness in North America is quite different from the German concept of *Heimat* that increasingly fell into discredit in post-war Germany. Moreover, as Goodbody argued along with Kate Rigby in *Ecocritical Theory*, European ecocriticism in general, faced with more densely populated lands, tends to be more concerned with cultural landscapes rather than wilderness, which constituted the initial direction of the North American discourse (2–3). Yet, precisely because Germany and Austria were, for the most part, such densely populated areas, long-standing debates focused on forest and wildlife management and conservation. Carrying such a line of thinking into the latter half of the twentieth century, Jens Lachmund points out that the green space in West Berlin after the construction of the Wall in 1961 became a highly contested issue. While wastelands of rubble and ruins from the war and its aftermath such as the abandoned railway facilities of Gleisdreieck turned into a new “wilderness,” that is, ecosystems for plants and animals, Berlin’s naturalists and ecologists found themselves cut off from Germany’s countryside and thus often chose city sites for their field research. Perhaps involuntarily, Berlin became an important early center of urban ecology.³

To expand on these arguments, the concept of “nature” has a long-standing and important tradition in German literature, though only few scholars have critically investigated the approaches, definitions, and ramifications of “nature” in German texts in a theoretical and sustained manner. Significantly, Germany’s most renowned ecocritics, among them Hubert Zapf, Hannes Bergthaller, Catrin Gersdorf, Sylvia Mayer, and Timo Müller, are Americanists working mostly on ecocritical readings of American and English literature. Conversely, many ecocritics in German studies have been those based in the United States, Australia, or European countries besides Germany. This assessment, however, is rapidly changing. If German ecocriticism had a somewhat slow start, aided by the work of Axel Goodbody in the United Kingdom, Kate Rigby in Australia, Heather I. Sullivan in the United States, Serenella Iovino in Italy, and Gabriele Dürbeck in Germany, this young field has already greatly expanded, diversified, and become more international. And thanks to initiatives and institutions like the European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and Environment (EASLCE), the European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment (*Ecozon@*), and the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, all indications are that in the coming years it will continue to

grow exponentially. As Heise points out in her preface, there is a lot of shared ground between North American and German ecocriticism providing fertile ground for current and future investigations. With the many new directions in ecocriticism beyond traditional studies of nature writing and the fast-growing body of ecocritical inquiries in German studies, we hope to make our volume part of a new field while also continuing conversations with a broader audience and fruitful cross-fertilizations.

German Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene creates cross-fertilizations with four sections that each addresses key issues in international ecocriticism: the local versus global question of place; the new materialisms that consider human cultures in the material, ecological frames, and atmospheres that enable our daily lives (including non-human agents and powers); the discourses of catastrophe, crisis, and cultural exploitation so dominant in environmental debates today; and the literary dilemma of genre, or how to write, imagine, and explore our current circumstances with unprecedented global implications. The chapters in the section “Interactions with Place and Ecological Systems: Local and Global” present a variety of strategies for making complex socio-ecological interactions in various “places” and ecological systems visible. Indeed, as noted above, one of the oldest and still most frequented debated questions in ecocriticism is how to understand and analyze “nature,” or as it is now more often termed in the Anthropocene, “natureculture,” on many different scales including the microscopic, the local, the regional, and the global. As Heise discusses in *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet*, it is not always the local that most easily and “naturally” indicates our embeddedness within ecosystems. In the Anthropocene, we are imbricated in “places” that are shaped by global exchanges of goods and commerce and whose weather, water, and food systems and air quality are impacted by large-scale continental flows. Yet, the local region, or “place,” is very often the only site to which individuals have easily comprehensible access and a concrete, conscious relationship, even as such boundaries are contested and fluid in our global commerce and large-scale anthropogenic alterations to ecosystems.

Our chapters describe various views overcoming the simple local-global divisions and offering an array of place-based studies. Heather I. Sullivan, for example, posits the “dark pastoral” as a descriptive trope for the Anthropocene as an era that produces industrial particulates indiscriminately covering the planet’s surface (as the dark) even as we gain much greater ecological understanding of the biosphere’s captivating landscapes so idealized in the pastoral. Of course, the celebrated beauty of rural lands

typically elides the economic and cultural systems that create the agricultural spaces as if separated from both urban and colonial power structures. Hence the dark pastoral describes the deceptive aspects of our categories that differentiate urban from rural even as industrial particulates cover both, and categories that posit human beings in a distinct and separate category outside of “nature.” We are participants in the mesh of Timothy Morton’s “dark ecology,” which in the Anthropocene looks darkly pastoral as we see in an array of Anthropocene texts from Goethe to Ilija Trojanow.

Simon Richter’s “Goethe’s *Faust* and the Eco-linguistics of ‘<Here>’” explains how Faust’s quest to make his impact on earth last for eons is an ironic prefiguring of what numerous climate scientists now call the “Faustian bargain” of the Anthropocene. Richter notes that Goethe hereby anticipates Dipesh Chakrabarty’s conjoining of natural and human history in his *Faust* with ominous implications. However, the tragedy also provides a productive juxtaposition between Faust’s attempt to structure and control the ocean and the Homunculus’s ecstatic immersion in the water, the “here.” Richter locates this “here” in ecolinguistics, insightfully providing us with the possibility of reconceiving our very idea of place and “here” as a concept existing linguistically only in relation to the subject “I/ego” or, to put it more ecologically, the reverse: the I/ego exists linguistically only in relation to a sense of here.

Alexander Phillips then describes an “alternative Anthropocene” in Stifter’s works, one without erasure of self into place but rather an alignment and joint production. In Phillips’s analysis, Stifter imagines human beings as “better managers of a more thoroughly engineered globe,” so that his characters in *Brigitta* successfully navigate forming and cultivating the land in a manner that allows nature to emerge in an “ideal” form. In *Abdias*, in contrast, the characters strive for a similar strategy but fail since they impose non-regional practices from Africa that cannot succeed in the European mountains. Stifter thus provides us with both a model of responsible adaptation to a specific region—albeit with connotations of the Anthropocene’s earth-engineering project—and the flawed efforts to cultivate the land without a proper alignment of the self. Phillips concludes that Stifter enacts the “problems and possibilities of what it would mean to properly inhabit a socially produced world.”

In the fourth chapter in this section, Bernhard Malkmus engages with Stanley Cavell’s concept of “neighboring nature” as a form of coming to terms with a specific feature of the human condition: the simultaneous

integration into natural history and *alienation* from it through multiple layers of second natures. Writing, in this context, has the potential to become what Cavell, with reference to Henry D. Thoreau, has called both “morning and mourning work”, thus reflecting on our embeddedness in and simultaneous separation from nature. Malkmus demonstrates how Peter Handke’s Bildungsroman *Die Wiederholung* dramatizes an art of memory and develops a mode of writing that is mindful of his anthropological situation. The protagonist, Filip Kobal, travels through Slovenia in the footsteps of his lost brother; this journey enacts repetition of memory as a mode of “neighboring” the lost human creatureliness, which reflects on itself and thereby experiences embeddedness and the distance from it simultaneously.

The chapters in the section “Vibrant Matter: Rocks, Minerals, and Food” pursue in manifold directions material ecocriticism’s quest to investigate critically the agency of things, substances, and forces. The title refers to Jane Bennett’s seminal text, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), in which she describes how agency occurs as a spectrum of impacts rather than a one-directional subject-object relationship. While material ecocriticism explores the relations among and between all material forms, from bacteria and pollutants to animals and landscapes, the focus in our case lies on rocks, minerals, air, and food. Looking at how specifically human and non-human forces coalesce, collide, or interact otherwise in order to produce meanings, the following chapters investigate multiple narratives that emerge in the conversation between text and the world. Such inquiry is inspired by discourses of the new materialisms that have sought to conceptualize non-anthropocentric approaches to the material world across the sciences and the humanities in fields such as philosophy, quantum physics, feminist studies, sociology, and archeology. If one of the key features of the new materialisms is to challenge what Diana Coole and Samantha Frost call “some of the most basic assumptions that have underpinned the modern world, including its normative sense of the human and its beliefs about human agency,” (4), the ensuing essays reread classical German literature and contemporary texts to question the dualism of humans and non-human matter and to explore matter’s creative force and potential.

In her chapter, “‘Mines aren’t really like that’: German Romantic Undergrounds Revisited,” Kate Rigby reconsiders the fascination with mining in early Romantic tales, specifically Novalis’s *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1800), at the onset of the Industrialization that, fossil-fueled by the steam engine patented in 1781 by James Watt, has come to epitomize the Anthropocene. Expanding on her previous thoughts in light of

recently published reconceptualizations of materiality, Rigby uncovers in the novel resilient and less-materialistic poetics and practices of mining. In this way, she argues, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* points to ecophilosophical ethics and responsibilities that question the political economy of extraction and delineate alternative reciprocal relationships between humans and mineral matter, which not only constitutes an exceedingly timely and relevant inquiry in the Anthropocene but also subtly undermines capitalist consumerism.

Moving from the underground to the atmosphere, Evi Zemanek in her contribution “(Bad) Air and (Faulty) Inspiration: Elemental and Environmental Influences on Fontane” turns to Theodor Fontane’s obsession with air and air quality. Using Bennett’s thoughts of “vibrant matter” as well as Stacy Alaimo’s concept of “trans-corporeality” and Lawrence Buell’s reflections on “toxic discourse,” Zemanek’s careful reading of Fontane’s novels, diaries, and letters shows that his texts not only engage with contemporaneous theories of disease and bacteriology but also understand air as an energetic medium that interacts with humans in crucial ways. Going further, Zemanek suggests that Fontane draws a fundamental connection between the input and output of air and text: while the poet’s creativity and general well-being depends on inspiration and thus good air, bad air and pollution negatively affect concentration and imagination.

Likewise inspired by the recent work in material ecocriticism, Caroline Schaumann in her essay “Speaking Stones: Material Agency in Christian Enzensberger’s *Geschichte der Natur*” examines an experimental, multilingual, and imaginative twenty-first-century narrative about sensual encounters with the non-human world. In particular, she reads Enzensberger’s book in conversation with and contrast to Heidegger’s 1949 short essay “Der Feldweg” (The Pathway). In Heidegger’s essay, the field path and a great oak tree imbue the narrator with wisdoms about time, expanse, and growth; Enzensberger’s voluminous text functions at a much smaller scale when the narrator realizes that some pebblestones have begun to speak. While both authors imbue their environments with agency, Enzensberger’s text challenges the boundaries of humans and matter altogether, suggesting instead an interrelated and entangled understanding of agency.

The fourth chapter in this part, Sabine Wilke and Cora L. Wilke-Gray’s “Performing Hunger: Fasting in Franz Kafka’s *Hunger Artist* as Poetic Practice,” seeks to expand the project of material ecocriticism by exploring

practices of food and consumption in their social, political, and cultural framework. Using Franz Kafka's short story "A Hunger Artist" (1924) as an example, the authors investigate how the cultural practice of fasting disrupts both consumptive patterns on a thematic level and narrative patterns on a poetic level, questioning the very system of excess that is the driving force of fossil-fuel-based capitalism. The hunger artist's refusal of food intake, the authors suggest, not only adds an aesthetic dimension to theoretical underpinnings on matter and its meanings but also highlights the self-destructive tendency of a cycle of ever-increasing consumerism that is the marker of global capitalism and environmental destruction.

Much recent ecocriticism turns away from traditional pastoral or bucolic views of "romantic" nature and attends instead to urban ecologies and the darker images of polluted ecosystems and environmental disasters in the age of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is an era of both spectacular catastrophes and mundane, ongoing ecological damage that culminates over time in extreme change, or "slow violence," in Rob Nixon's term.⁴ As Gabriele Dürbeck describes, contemporary environmental literature often portrays both kinds of ecological disasters as "divine punishment" or "nature taking revenge" in dystopian fantasies that either suggest an urgency for change or offer pragmatic utopias promising alternatives (1–2). Other texts document catastrophes in terms of the socio-economic and historical circumstances. Rather than privileging the popular images and texts presenting mass devastation as a spectacle seemingly inherent to the industrial capitalist trajectory, the chapters in the section, "Representing Catastrophe, Crisis, and Ecological Devastation," contribute to both catastrophe and risk theory with nuanced attention to the cultural-historical contexts and self-aware portrayals of crisis and catastrophe without the Jeremiad hysteria or declensionist declarations.

In his essay, "When Nature Strikes Back: The Continuity of Early-Modern Disaster Motifs in Franz Hohler's 1989 novel *Der neue Berg*," Christoph Weber offers significant historical context for textual depiction of disasters. In assessing Franz Hohler's "doomsday narratives in which humankind is overwhelmed by uncontrollable forces of nature," Weber reveals their similarity to early modern stories of earthquakes as divine punishment that demands both interpretation and changed behavior. By presenting a both impossible and unpredictable disaster, namely a volcanic eruption in Switzerland, Hohler portrays the baffled reactions to this extreme and scientifically illogical scenario thereby, in Weber's words, illustrating "the consequences and limitations of human agency in the Anthropocene." We have neither the imagination nor the tools to address

these new large-scale disasters without precedent, but we do, as Weber makes clear, have older frames for writing such cataclysmic events, which can distort or inspire our collective responses.

Sean Ireton's essay, "Environmental Exploitation and National Invective in Thomas Bernhard's *Frost*," traces the confluence of World War II remnants in the supposedly pristine Austrian Alpine scenery with large-scale land projects. Instead of aesthetic landscapes, the surroundings in Bernhard's high mountain village Weng are harsh and hazardous, icy and rigid. The forests are logged and the river is dammed for a major power plant; in other words, the slow violence of post-war culture, national energy projects, and industrial society document the ongoing crisis of denial and devastation. Ireton reads *Frost* in terms of Austrian national literature, that is, Adalbert Stifter and Elfriede Jelinek, who provide a provocatively contrasting frame for critique. He also incorporates Austrian post-war history during the "Wiederaufbau" creating massive dams, the Kaprun power plant, ski areas, and reconstructing riverways with significant ecological damage in the "technologization of nature" even as Austria continued to cultivate its reputation as a site of aesthetic mountain beauty with moral purity.

In his study of Herzog's films and Michał Marczak's 2012 Polish-German eco-documentary *Fuck for Forest*, Brad Prager confronts twentieth-century German and European responses to the inhabitants of rainforests in the Anthropocene. As Prager points out, Herzog's films not only explore catastrophe and collapse or disasters and dangers through a romantic lens with the idealization of nature but also an alienation from cataclysmic humanity and nature alike. Similarly, the documentary of the forest activist group reveals the convoluted and romanticized ecological efforts of "Fuck for Forest" who sell "eco-porn" and then donate the profits to indigenous peoples. The group travels in the film to Brazil in order to help the Huitoto population along the Ampiyacu River, only to find there not kindred spirits but confused locals who fail to understand the Berlin group's nudity and public sex as helpful acts in the battle against deforestation. The crisis here is both ecological devastation of the forest and cultural failure to comprehend one's own ideological framework much less than that of another culture.

The fourth chapter in this section, Katharina Gerstenberger's "Assessing How We Assess Environmental Risk: Kathrin Röggl's Documentary Film *The Mobile Future*," continues this critique of environmentalist efforts to address ecological challenges without first grappling with their cultural assumptions and frames. As Gerstenberger shows, crisis in Röggl's

documentary is not ambiguous: she interviews people in Kosovo dealing with the mineral mines of Trepça and a derelict lignite refining plant and in the East German town of Lubmin on the Baltic Sea coast where they continue efforts to decontaminate radioactive areas. Yet, what emerges in the film and in Gerstenberger's analysis is the crucial issue of risk theory described by Ulrich Beck and brought into ecocriticism with Ursula Heise's studies.⁵ In other words, we may live with extremely toxic and damaged/damaging circumstances, but the culture and science of assessing our assessments of what is risky and what is acceptable remain murky and complex with an overwhelming lack of clarity about the implications of where we are in the Anthropocene and where we are going.

Our final group of chapters, "Genres in the Anthropocene," addresses more recent German fiction in terms of another issue at the forefront in ecocriticism, namely the question of genre and generic strategies. How does ecocriticism follow, challenge, or go beyond established fiction genres such as prose narratives, novels, science fiction, or thrillers? What insights do these different genres project in terms of their ability to present wide-scale, even global environmental crises in the Age of the Anthropocene? Many if not most ecocritical inquiries focus on the sites and locales of environmental encounters (as it is also illustrated in this volume), yet, it is not only a question of *where* these encounters take place but also *when* in terms of the current trajectory of climate change, global pollution, and radically altered landscapes. Accordingly, the chapters in this part carefully consider timescapes of the past and future in order to properly situate textual encounters with "nature." Focusing on the tensions between old-world romanticism and the "end of nature," they address expectations of "Romantic consumerism" (Timothy Morton), that is, an (potentially escapist) aesthetics of environmental literature, the terrifying allure of catastrophe, and other narrative strategies used to depict threatened, bygone, or destroyed "nature."

Jason Groves's "Writing After Nature: A Sebaldian Eco-poetics" reconsiders Andreas Huyssen's assessment of Sebald's apparent history of destruction with no beginning or future. Groves conversely suggests that the Sebaldian cataclysmic scenarios not only offer imaginations of cultural catastrophes in the Anthropocene but also point to a future beyond twentieth-century anthropocentric beliefs and paralyzing horrors. Specifically, Groves locates eco-poetic instances in *The Rings of Saturn* that explore the interconnectedness of humans and non-humans in a post-natural world of simultaneously expanded and reduced human

agency. Groves similarly argues that the prose poem *After Nature* not only announces a post-natural state but also evokes a strange futurity that challenges a declensionist pattern usually attributed to Sebald.

Axel Goodbody in his chapter “Telling the Story of Climate Change: The German Novel in the Anthropocene” begins by outlining some of the challenges that climate change poses for Western culture in general and literature in particular. Climate change transcends the traditional separation between human and natural history yet is often perceived as a natural disaster, which yet again reinforces a separation between nature and culture. Moreover, climate change challenges existing literary genres to represent something so vast, complex, amorphous, and global to the point that some have proposed a discrete genre of climate fiction. Goodbody follows these theoretical considerations with an overview of German climate novels and an in-depth analysis of Ilija Trojanow’s *EisTau* and Cornelia Franz’s *Ins Nordlicht blacken* in particular, carefully considering the narrative challenge of climate change including spatial scale, time scale, agency, and narrative closure.

In her contribution “The Anthropocene in Contemporary German Ecothrillers” Gabriele Dürbeck explores ecothrillers as one of few genres depicting climate change, which, in its global and diffuse effects, often remains absent from ecocritical inquiries. Seeking to educate by popular means, ecothrillers address both the present and the future in a blend of fictional and non-fictional elements. They thus serve to popularize information and mediate knowledge while using what Dürbeck calls a “dramaturgy of suspense.” Dürbeck’s analysis of Frank Schätzing’s popular novel *Der Schwarm* and Dirk C. Fleck’s *GO! Die Ökodiktatur* and *Das Tahiti-Projekt* suggests that these ecothrillers, in apocalyptic patterns and dystopian scenarios, highlight humans’ destructive impact on the planet, delineate alternative human relationships with their environment (while also rehearsing stereotypes and clichés), and contribute to an awareness of a spectrum of distributed agencies.

NOTES

1. Ursula Heise speaks of an “ecological cosmopolitanism” in *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet*; Dipesh Chakrabarty distinguishes between “global” as part of human economic and political scales, whereas “planetary” constitutes the material, ecological scale in “The Climate of History: Four Theses.”

2. See Chakrabarty 207 and Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene.'" Other scholars place the beginning even earlier with increased agricultural activity in antiquity or later in the seventeenth century with the genocide of Native American peoples whose farmland then reverted back to forests and changed the levels of CO₂. Jan Zalasiewicz, the Chair of the Anthropocene Working Group of the International Commission on Stratigraphy, suggests a later date for the Anthropocene, focusing on the "Great Acceleration" in industry and nuclear activity in the 1940s producing radioactivity that can be traced in stratigraphic layers across the planet. See Zalasiewicz, et al.
3. See Jens Lachmund on the Ecology of Berlin, "The Making of an Urban Ecology."
4. See Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, where he notes: "By slow violence, I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is an event or action that is typically not viewed as violence at all" 2.
5. See Heise, *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet*.

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