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**Themenheft: Ecological Archives**

***Gastherausgeber:in: Caroline Schaumann und Paul Buchholz***

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# Cultural Ecology, the Environmental Humanities, and the Ecological Archives of Literature

Hubert Zapf

University of Augsburg, Germany

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**Abstract:** The paper discusses the role of literature in relation to the general archives of culture from the perspective of cultural ecology. It places literary studies in the transdisciplinary framework of the Environmental Humanities; looks at how the ecological turn in literary studies has changed the literal and metaphorical archives of our disciplines; outlines some basic ideas of a cultural ecology of literature and the ways in which literature acts as an ecological force in culture; and traces the ecological agency of literary archives, which are reaching back into deep-time memories of culture-nature-coevolution, as sources of imaginative energy in examples from American literature, referencing texts by Whitman, Hawthorne, Melville, and Morrison. In the final part, the article addresses the productive relation between archive and experiment in creative responses to the Anthropocene in contemporary examples ranging from German poetry to the novel *The Search for Heinrich Schloegel* by Canadian writer Martha Baillie and to the 2017 Guillermo de Toro film *The Shape of Water*.

**Keywords:** cultural ecology, environmental humanities, ecological archives, Anthropocene, North American literature, German poetry

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Let me start with a few comments on the environmental humanities which are being institutionalized worldwide as centers of environmental research and teaching in an attempt to reassess the epistemic, social, cultural, and political relevance of the humanities in the knowledge production of universities and in the creation of a more sustainable society. Within this new interdisciplinary assemblage of disciplines, however, the status of literature and literary studies seems rather uncertain. While it is frequently asserted that literature, art, and other forms of cultural creativity as a core area of the humanities have some-

thing important to offer to environmental knowledge, it often remains rather unclear what this special contribution could consist of apart from general moral, culture-critical, and political interventions that can as well be made by sociologists, political scientists, or cultural philosophers – or, in fact, by engaged citizens and environmental activists. This uncertain role of literature has to do with at least two complex questions that such an interdisciplinary dialogue entails – the age-old but newly relevant question of how the knowledge provided by literature relates to the knowledge produced in other disciplines both within the humanities and in relation to the hard sciences; and the very urgent contemporary question of the role of literature – and of other forms of cultural creativity – in an age of global ecological crisis designated by the omnipresent new concept of the Anthropocene.

The first question demands new reflection on the specific potential of literature as a form of ecological knowledge and communication in its own right – which is what cultural ecology is trying to do; the second question, which uneasily intersects with the first, concerns the role of the cultural past in general, and of literature in particular as part of the anthropocentric history of Western thought. If the escalating ecological crisis is to a significant extent due to a deeply ingrained mindset based on the hierarchical domination of mind over body, culture over nature, humans over the nonhuman world that shapes the grand narratives of Western culture, then it is evidently the task of the environmental humanities to expose these historical ideas and narratives as manifestations of a false consciousness that has to be radically revised and replaced by new ideas and narratives more adequate to the political, ethical, and aesthetic challenges and responsibilities of the Anthropocene. Of course, such critical examination of traditional concepts of culture and nature and of the asymmetries of power that they helped to legitimize in colonial, racist, gender, and capitalist discourses, is an indispensable task of literary studies and textual analysis in an environmental humanities context. The problem with such a hermeneutics of suspicion<sup>1</sup> is that in its totalizing gesture it undermines the very attempt to bring literary studies into the epistemic field of environmentally oriented knowledge not just as a disavowal of its own past or as a merely derivative illustration of the knowledge of other disciplines but as its own domain of alternative, specifically complex forms of ecological knowledge which offers a history of thought and imagination that may not be obsolete at all but rather of special importance precisely in an age of ecological crisis.

It seems to me that the theme of this special issue, “Ecological Archives,” points in this direction. In choosing this particular focus, the editors act on the epistemic premise that there is a task beyond the mere dismissal of the cultural past, which is the recovery, reexamination, and contemporary actualization of

forgotten, marginalized, suppressed, or underestimated documents, texts, ideas, and genres that appear in a new light as precursors and anticipators of current ecological thought, and that can indeed become sources of alternative models of a more ecologically minded culture of the future.

In its widest sense as proposed by Foucault in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, the archive is what regulates everything that can be said and what remains unsayable in the discourses of a culture, what is preserved and what is silenced in the cultural memory. Archives in this view always involve processes of inclusion and exclusion, of selection and legitimation that are intrinsically related to the historical power structures, the 'regimes of truth' from which such archives emerge. In the case of the archives of literary studies, this means that the sources of disciplinary knowledge production such as texts and theories, canons and methods of interpretation are both preserved and constantly being redefined by the shifting epistemic paradigms that are shaping the discipline. In this ongoing process of defining their foundational epistemic premises, literary studies are therefore centrally confronted with "the question what legitimately belongs to the archive" (Manoff 13).

In our situation today, it would certainly be misleading to assume any one such single predominant epistemic paradigm in literary studies, but among the range of diverse current approaches in the field, a development towards a more ecologically minded orientation does seem to be one of its characteristic overarching features. It therefore does not seem an exaggeration to talk of an ecological turn in literary and cultural studies that began in the late 20th century and gained increased momentum in the 21st century.

What this entailed in terms of redefining the archives of the discipline manifested itself at first in the emergence of ecocriticism in the 1990s, when with the landmark book by Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, the tradition of American nature writing in the footsteps of Henry David Thoreau was reassessed as an important contribution to a more ecologically minded literary culture than that offered by the then prevalent canons of modern and postmodern texts and theories. As this narrow realist focus widened in the successive waves that characterized the accelerating growth of ecocritical studies in the last couple of decades, other hitherto neglected or unheard sources and voices were rediscovered or newly written into the archive from ecofeminist, postcolonial, indigenous, media- or genre-specific perspectives and from the unearthing of an ever-increasing wealth of proto-ecological sources from earlier historical periods (Zapf, *Handbook of Ecocriticism*). The effect has been an enormous extension and diversification of the field, but also an ecological rereading of major texts and theoretical models.

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

The redefinition of the archive that this entails can be clearly seen in the German studies volume just mentioned. While covering emergent genres of environmentally engaged writing such as climate change fiction, ecothrillers, and ecopoetry, it also traces proto-ecological ideas in classical and romantic writers and reassesses the contributions to ecological thought by theoretical approaches from *Naturphilosophie* to phenomenology, from the Frankfurt School to Luhmann's systems theory and Ulrich Beck's notion of world risk society (Dürbeck et al.) Caroline Schaumann's contribution on Alexander von Humboldt, for example, reassesses the new relevance of this eminent explorer, writer, and multidisciplinary scientist, by pointing out how Humboldt conceived the world as a dynamic interweaving of active forces and thus anticipated the modern ecological idea of interactive networks as a fundamental feature of the global web of life ("Alexander von Humboldt as Ecologist"). Schaumann elucidates how in Humboldt's writings, among which his massive *Kosmos* stands out as his opus magnum, Humboldt already pointed out the first symptoms of the global environmental challenges of the Anthropocene – deforestation, desertification, species depletion, and climate change –, and therefore must be considered a pioneer ecologist whose reception, after long neglect, has significantly intensified in recent years. Another example of a classical German writer who has been reread from an ecocritical angle is Goethe, whose attempts to bring art and the sciences more closely together resonate with contemporary ecoteory as much as his view of life and literature as a process of continuous becoming that unfolds in always emergent moments of contact between world and self, nature and culture, mind and matter. In her chapter on "Goethe's Concept of Nature," Heather Sullivan looks at this process in *Werther*, the *Farbenlehre*, and in *Faust*, and reads this core text of the canon in new ways by showing how the journey



of the human mind towards self-discovery leads in the end not to a separation but to a reconnection of mind and matter as the source of meaning and survival.

Another instructive case in this ecological rewriting of the archive of German Studies is the reassessment of German romantic poetry and philosophy by ecocritics such as Kate Rigby, Sabine Wilke, Wendy Wheeler, and others. Poetry and *Naturphilosophie* were intersecting in the works of Goethe, Schlegel, Novalis, or Schelling, and it is especially this connection between poetry and philosophy that has found new attention in its fusion of mind and matter, thought and imagination, human and natural creativity, as epitomized in Schelling's formula that "nature [is] visible mind, mind invisible nature" (Rigby, "Romanticism and Ecocriticism" 67). In the semiotic networks that link the communicative processes of life with human language and communication, such as in the notion of *Natursprache* (language of nature), these writers and philosophers in this view anticipate insights of modern biosemiotics, which has become one of the new, cutting-edge directions of current ecological thought (Rigby, "Earth's Poesy" 45). This reassessment also applies to later authors, texts, theories, and movements in German intellectual history such as the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, whose significant contribution to ecological thought had not been acknowledged in former paradigms such as Marxist, poststructuralist, or historical-materialist approaches (Müller). In terms of literary genres, the volume *Ökologische Genres*, edited by Evi Zemanek, likewise documents this rewriting, addressing not only the established ecocritical modes of pastoral and apocalypse but diverse genres from fairy tale to gothic novel, from *Bildungsroman* to science fiction, from diary to travelogue as part of the long-term archive of an ecological imagination. Cultural ecology is a theoretical project which participates in this rewriting of the archive as a way to bring different periods, genres, and epistemic models into conversation with each other from an overarching transdisciplinary interest in their contribution to ecocultural knowledge, with a particular focus on their elucidation of the ecological dimension of literature and other forms of aesthetic discourse.

This brings me to a necessarily very brief outline of some of the basic assumptions of a cultural ecology of literature that I have summarized in *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts*. A guiding assumption of this approach is that imaginative literature deals with the basic relation between culture and nature in particularly multifaceted, self-reflexive, and transformative ways, and that it produces an 'ecological' dimension of discourse precisely on account of its semantic openness, imaginative intensity, and aesthetic complexity. This focus on imaginative, artistically complex texts does not imply any presumption of cultural elitism but rather an exploration of the critical-creative potential of

the aesthetic as a vital mode of ecological knowledge and transformation. It resonates with Derek Attridge's notion of the "singularity of literature," even while acknowledging the indissoluble interdependence and semiotic coagency of individual texts with their intertextual and historical-cultural environments.

One of the theoretical background references is Gregory Bateson's *Ecology of Mind*, which explores what he calls "connecting patterns" between mind and life, expanding the mind of the individual ego toward an ecology of vital interrelations with other minds and with their material as well as historical-cultural environments (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind*). What is of special interest to literary studies is that Bateson posits an analogy between ecological and poetic thought and ascribes a central role to metaphor in expressing and communicating those 'patterns which connect' heterogeneous domains of mind and life (*A Sacred Unity*). Another key reference is Peter Finke's *Evolutionary Cultural Ecology* and the notion of cultural ecosystems that he develops from Bateson's ecology of mind and from Jakob von Uexküll's distinction between *Umwelten*, *Merkwelten* and *Innenwelten*, of the interacting worlds of ambience, memory, and interiority in ecological processes. Combining evolutionary biology, systems theory, and linguistics, Finke points out that the characteristic environments of human beings are not just external but internal environments, the inner worlds and landscapes of the mind, of language, the psyche, and the cultural imagination which follow their own metabolic processes of energy transaction and make up the habitats of humans as much as their external natural and material environments ("Die Evolutionäre Kulturökologie"). Literature, art, and other forms of cultural creativity are essential in this view to contribute to the richness, complexity, and diversity of those cultural ecosystems to ensure their continuing evolutionary potential of self-correction and self-renewal.

A cultural ecology of literature is positioned, on the one hand, in this general field of cultural ecology; on the other hand, it is likewise positioned in contemporary ecocritical theory and resonates with other approaches in the field such as material ecocriticism or biosemiotics, but also with traditions of critical and aesthetic theory that have helped to describe the cultural functions of literature (see Zapf, *Literature as Cultural Ecology*). In this transdisciplinary perspective, literature can itself be described as the symbolic medium of a particularly potent form of "cultural ecology." This approach considers literary texts both as part of the discursive systems of a culture and a distinctive mode of knowledge, representation, and communication in its own right, a paradoxical, nondiscursive form of discourse which gains its creativity from the conflictual tension between the civilizational system and its exclusions. Its central assumption is that literature is not only a preferred medium for complex negotiations of the culture-nature relationship but that in its aesthetic transformation of experi-

ence, it acts like an ecological force in the larger cultural system. It breaks up closed structures of thought, language, and discourse, symbolically empowers the marginalized, and reconnects what is culturally separated. It inscribes the ecological principles of connectivity and diversity into language and discourse, bringing together conceptual and perceptual dimensions, ideas and sensory experiences, human and more-than-human domains in complex forms of embodied interactivity. The aesthetic mode in this view challenges the deep-rooted divide between mind and body, self and other, culture and nature that has shaped the dominant anthropocentric narratives of linear civilizational progress.

Aesthetic theory, since its 18th-century manifestations in Baumgarten through Hegel, Schelling, Nietzsche and Adorno up to Wolfgang Iser's literary anthropology and Gernot Böhme's ecophilosophical aesthetics of nature, has struggled with the double nature of art and literature as both a lived experience and a form of knowledge, as a form of *sinnliche Erkenntnis*, of "sensuous knowledge," in which the tension and ambiguous coagency between mind and life was part of the ways in which the productivity of aesthetic and imaginative processes was conceived. What has emerged from these often controversial and still ongoing debates as a viable reference for cultural ecology is that literature — and aesthetic communication more generally — represents a specifically complex, nonsystemic, and intrinsically transdisciplinary form of embodied knowledge which is at the same time an ever-renewable source of critical and creative energies in the cultural system. The relationship of culture to nature is an intrinsic part of these "cultures of complexity," as Sacha Kagan (*Art and Sustainability*) calls aesthetic processes, not in the sense of nature as an ideological construct but as a force field of energies which both sustain and exceed cultural processes of evolution and survival.

The ecological function of literature in culture is thus not limited to questions of content or to explicit environmental themes but is a transformative semiotic force which opens up closed circuits of communication by reconnecting mind and body, internal and external environments, the cultural memory to the deep-time memory of culture-nature coevolution. It resists straightforward ascriptions of meanings but helps to create the imaginative space for otherness — both in terms of the representation of the unrepresented, and in terms of the reader's coagency in the textual process. As such, it represents a source of ever-renewable creative energies in culture for ever new generations of readers, and in this sense I call literary texts *sustainable texts* (Zapf, *Literature as Cultural Ecology* and "Cultural Ecology and the Sustainability of Literature").

This assumption also has important implications for the notion of ecological archives in literature, which are not just sites of stored ecocultural memory but an

agentive force in texts and in their creative engagement with changing sociohistorical environments. Indeed, literary creativity characteristically emerges from feedback loops between these generative archives and the new text, between the recycling of deep-time ecosemiotic imaginations and their adaptation to current historical and aesthetic challenges.

One such sustainable source of ecocultural energies from the literary archive are the four classical elements of water, earth, air, and fire which, even though they were replaced in science in the early 19th century by the periodic chemical system, remained active in art and literature as catalysts of aesthetic processes and imaginative stagings of human-nonhuman interactivity that draw on the ambivalent, both creative and destructive agency of material forces. The poetics of the four elements dates back to ancient cultures but is, as Anke Kramer and Evi Zemanek show in their respective chapters in the volume *Ecological Thought in German Literature and Culture*, still influential as a source of both transgressive and connective energies in modern and contemporary texts. While Kramer demonstrates this primarily in mythic tales and romantic narratives (“Cultural History of the Four Elements”), Zemanek explores the common ground between elemental poetics and the notion of material agency in contemporary poetry, taking poems by Josef Czernin and Ulrike Draesner as her examples (“Elemental Poetics”).

Another example is the motif of metamorphosis as a long-term generative form of the literary archive. Since its codification in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, itself a collection of previous archival sources, the motif has been enormously influential throughout literary history. Metamorphosis implies no strict ontological separation but a living interconnection of all animate and inanimate beings, and is closely associated with elemental poetics in that the elements can transform into each other and between human and nonhuman shapes (Kramer). In German literature, its significance is marked by key texts such as Goethe’s “Metamorphosis of Plants,” which takes the leaf as an archetypal form of both plant life and literary writing, deriving from the autopoiesis of nature the evolving patterns of human communication and creativity.

But the motif likewise remains active in later transformations. In American literature, Walt Whitman’s poetry that he collected in his *Leaves of Grass* is a prime example. In its form, it is radically innovative and breaks out of former poetic conventions, while at the same time drawing in its texture on a rich repertoire of classical and romantic sources. The Dionysian flow of his free verse gains its creative energy not just from the affirmation of the new, but from the intertextual dialogue with the literary past inscribed into its language, motifs, and metaphors, but also from the actualization of the deep-time semiotics of

human-nature coevolution in the form of elemental poetics, human-animal metaphors, and ever new metamorphoses pervading his texts.

Grass is of course the central symbol of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, which as an unspectacular phenomenon of external nature becomes an inspirational source of both infinite diversity and infinite connectivity, a multiple source of mutual transformations between mind and nature, life and text ("O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues"; Whitman 26). It is the basis for always new metamorphoses of the self and the world in which the poet, too, includes himself, and which he passes on as his testimony to his readers when he rapidly ages in the end, anticipating his transition to death as a series of polymorphic shape changes between self, land, water, clouds, and air ("I depart as air / I shake my white locks at the runaway sun / I effuse my flesh in eddies / and drift it in lacy jags"), a modern Proteus figure who immerses himself in a very material sense into the deep-time knowledge and regenerative cycle of nature: "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles" (Whitman 78)—a metamorphosis of text into life which autopoetically reflects back on the ongoing interactivity between text and reader.

It is worth noting here that in a transdisciplinary context, Whitman's leaves of grass not only resonate with Goethe's notion of the leaf as an archetype of both natural and eco-poetic creativity, but with contemporary observations on the significance of grass in human history that Dipesh Chakrabarty addresses in his landmark essay on "The Climate of History." Chakrabarty points out that the widespread flourishing of grass coincided with the beginnings of agriculture in the Holocene about 10,000 years ago, at a threshold time after the last Ice Age when the atmosphere of the planetary ecosystem gained a state of precarious balance that made the development and survival of human civilization possible in the first place. Grass in its diverse forms including barley and wheat is indicative of the precarious coevolution of human with nonhuman life in the past millennia, which is increasingly threatened by anthropogenic alterations in climate, biodiversity, and the material atmosphere of the planetary ecosystem. Poetic voices like Whitman's are interventions in this process which, by taking the semiotic potential of this icon of environmental fertility as a creative matrix of their texts, revitalize the deep-time knowledge of human-nature coevolution in the semiosis of modern texts. What Chakrabarty postulates as a new orientation in historiography in times of the Anthropocene, therefore, namely the fusion of human with natural history, of historical with evolutionary time is thus in a way already part of the long-term ecological archives that are actualized in ever new ways in the creative processes of literature.

As has been said before, cultural archives are themselves not closed monolithic systems of stored knowledge but exist in an ambiguous relation between what they contain and leave out, what they authorize and discard in their forms of institutionalizing the cultural memory. This tension between inclusion and exclusion, between “excision and excess,” as Sarah Nuttall calls it, limits their reliability but also represents a constant incentive to the imagination (283). In some of the best-known American novels, the archive is the starting point for their explorations of these tensions between past and present, exclusion and revitalization, control and excess, death and life associated with their creative processes.

A prominent example is Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*, which can be read, on one important level, as an explicit autopoetic parable of this agency of the archive in the literary imagination. The story of the scarlet letter is derived from a discovery by the narrator in the archives of the Boston Custom House, where he finds enclosed in some forgotten documents a faded piece of scarlet cloth forming the letter A, which had once been sewn by the historical protagonist of the narrative, Hester Prynne. This material signifier, which had initially been a mark of social stigmatization intended to mean “adultery,” had been turned by Hester into an artful sign of her resistance to cultural conformity, which gains unexpected new force, after a lapse of two centuries, in the narrator’s present. As he touches the newly discovered sign in the archive, it emanates an electrifying heat as if of “red-hot iron” (Hawthorne 62) that affects his whole body and reawakens his long-dormant imagination in a sudden eruption of creative energy. The marginalized past gains new presence in the novel in its imaginative reincarnation in the story of Hester Prynne, which, carried forward by the magical force of the letter which is throughout associated with the element of fire, generates a critical metadiscourse on the imprisoning effect of Puritan fundamentalism as well as of Victorian regimes of gender roles and authoritative power, but at the same time activates counterdiscursive energies of emancipation and cultural self-renewal by reconnecting self and other, mind and body, intellect and passion in intense moments of contact and embodied interaction.

The archive is also the starting point for the imaginative journey of another classical American novel, Melville’s *Moby Dick*, which begins with multiple extracts from sources on whales compiled by a sub-sub-librarian that, as it were, materialize in the white whale as a powerful agency in the novel. The whale represents opposite versions from the archive, as the demonized enemy of a biophobic civilization personified by Captain Ahab, and as a source of biophilic connectivity for the narrator Ishmael, who in the course of his deeply felt en-

counters with the whale is becoming aware of his “Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals” (Melville 254).

In a historically and culturally different context, this transformation of the conflictual potential of official archives into an ecocultural counterdiscourse is shaping the creative process of one of the most important African American novels, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. In African American ecocritical approaches, questions of ecology are inseparably connected with questions of race, gender, and memory,<sup>2</sup> which are defining perspectives in all of Morrison’s novels, especially in *Beloved*. From various historical sources about slavery in the U.S., many of which she herself had compiled as a Random House editor in *The Black Book*,<sup>3</sup> Morrison retrieves the case of Margaret Garner, an escaped slave who started killing her children as she was about to be recaptured by her owner, and turns the story of this forgotten victim of slavery into the main narrative of her novel. The driving force of this multiperspectival narrative, however, is a strange, half real, half imaginary woman called Beloved, who one day appears like a ghost from the past that seems to be a reincarnation of the protagonist’s dead daughter, but beyond this personal dimension also represents all anonymous victims of slavery since the times of the Middle Passage that are brought back to life in the stream-of-consciousness memories of various characters. Waves and water are an important element in the novel both as a grave of history in the Black Atlantic and as a medium of what Morrison calls “rememory,” a process of reliving and symbolically overcoming the traumas of the past through transformative story-telling (Morrison 44–45). In this process, African American traditions of story-telling, jazz rhythms and the sounds of blues are integrated into a painfully dissonant, experimental style which in its improvisational openness confronts the civilizational structures of modernity with the aberrations of its repressed past, but also activates deeper sources of creative energy from the reconnection of past and present, culture and nature, traumatic memory and tentative new beginnings in a postcatastrophic world. When Beloved reappears as a grown-up young woman at the novel’s beginning, she emerges from water: “A fully dressed woman walked out of the water” (63), and when she disappears again from her mother’s world at the novel’s end, she returns into her element of water, a naked pregnant woman, “with fish for hair” (328).<sup>4</sup> The historical-political narrative of African American trauma and regeneration has a mythopoetic subtext which blends human with nonhuman, cultural with natural energies. The fictional rewriting of the archives of history gains its imaginative force by the contextualization of its political and cultural dimensions within an ecological dimension that resonates with the deep-time memory of human-nature coevolution as a regenerative source of postcatastrophic life and survival.

In contemporary literature, the archive gains new significance in the context of the challenges to traditional aesthetic practices posed by the Anthropocene, which has become one of the key frames of reference in recent environmental studies (Dürbeck). It has been argued that in view of the unprecedented scale of the environmental, economic, intellectual, and ethical challenges of the Anthropocene not only political agendas and sociocultural practices need to be drastically changed, but inherited categories of literature and literary knowledge need to be adjusted to a posthuman condition, which limits the range of human agency and entangles the lives of individuals in hyperreal interdependencies that exceed their cognitive and emotional grasp. Inasmuch as all traditional literature and story-telling are based on such human categories of perception and experience, this fundamental crisis requires completely new forms of literary representation and communication including the extension of human to geological time-space, decentering the human subject, embedding individual lives in complex networks of relationships, acknowledging the independent agency of the nonhuman, and translating into aesthetic form the multiscalar nature of the problems in which these interconnected actor-networks in the Anthropocene are enmeshed (Clark 2015).

However, while such ideas have provided fruitful impulses for both theory and various forms of creative practices, a purely oppositional, radically discontinuous view of the relation between the literary past and the Anthropocene not only neglects the significance of cultural memory for any sustainable vision of the present and future (Assmann). It also eclipses the long history of the ways in which imaginative literature has been dealing with crisis, disaster, and, indeed, with alternative forms of culture-nature communication. In its experimental innovations, the literature of the Anthropocene inevitably draws on the repertoire from various historical, cultural, and literary archives in its creative response to the challenges of this new global mega-crisis of human history. A binary definition of Anthropocene literature in the neo-avant-gardist mode of a complete break with the literary past is not only theoretically unsustainable but also fails to correspond with the actual forms of literary production.

A case in point is the German poetry collection *Lyrrik im Anthropozän*, which features texts from a wide spectrum of both established and emergent poetic voices within the overarching framework of the Anthropocene (Bayer and Seel). The poems are verbal explorations at the interface between geological and historical time, scientific and metaphoric language, realism and phantasy, biomorphic and technomorphic images, elemental poetics and subjective dreamscapes, urban and wild spaces, human and animal ecologies. It is these self-reflexive poetic excursions into the boundary zones between the familiar and the alien, the human and the nonhuman, the sayable and the unsayable, language and its



limits that provide for the enormous variety and productivity of the collection. The deep-time archives of poetic creativity as described above — elemental poetics, human-animal symbiosis, metamorphosis — remain potent sources of these anthropocenic poetic experiments. In the concluding essay, Karin Fellner points out four characteristic features of poetic writing in the Anthropocene — *bezeugen, inmitten sein, defokussieren, durchlässig werden* — i.e., to “bear witness” to what has been lost but needs to be remembered in the face of the environmental crisis; to be aware of our being “in the midst” of multiple relations with the material environment; to “defocus” one’s mind and perception by allowing the poetic word play to wander into the blurred margins of prevailing discourses; to “become permeable” by opening oneself to the small, the inconspicuous and apparently insignificant, the sublime traces of living interconnections between humans and nature even within a world of anthropogenic deformations. For each of these four features of Anthropocene poetry, Fellner cites poetic precedents, proto-ecological voices from the literary past — Eichendorff, Droste-Hülshoff, Jean Paul, Robert Walser. As Axel Goodbody writes in his essay in the same collection, citing Heinrich Detering, “contemporary poets such as Jan Wagner, Silke Scheuermann and Nico Bleutge have drawn from the archive of past forms and treatments of themes in their creative response to the Anthropocene” (Goodbody 303; my trans.). Alongside the remarkable spectral pastoral of human-geological metamorphoses in Droste-Hülshoff’s “Die Mergelgrube” (“The Marl Pit”), he names Goethe’s “Metamorphosis of Plants” as one particularly influential precursor text (Goodbody 301). This creative recycling of the archive produces “ecologically sensitive, self-reflexive forms of writing” (303) which address topics like species depletion and the devastations of global capitalism not in a one-dimensional, didactic manner but in multifaceted and polysemic forms, whose openness to the active cointerpretation of readers is one of their constitutive elements.

In the genre of the novel, an example of the rewriting of the archive as a transformative link between past and future, cultural memory and ecological counterdiscourse, which is of special interest in a transatlantic context, is the novel *The Search for Heinrich Schlögel* (2014) by Canadian writer Martha Baillie. Because of its exemplary character for the previous observations, I discuss this relatively little-known but artistically remarkable novel in somewhat more detail. The search that the novel describes involves a double plot — the expedition of a young man named Heinrich Schlögel to the Canadian Arctic in the tracks of the explorer Samuel Hearne —, and the search of Heinrich’s sister Inge for her brother, who disappears one day from his German town of Todtnang into the New World without leaving any trace. For a long time, the two plot lines seem rather unconnected and the narrative switches back and forth between

them in the form of letters, journal entries, remembered scenes, comments, observations and philosophical comments by both siblings. This shifting assemblage of texts is composed from a continuously expanding archive in which an anonymous archivist collects every source of information that can be found about Inge's missing brother and through which the reader is pulled into the strange obsessiveness and erratic turns of Heinrich's quest. While we follow his expedition into an increasingly fantastic wilderness of the Canadian north, we encounter sublime and bizarrely beautiful landscapes which manifest their geological agency in epiphanic moments of revelation, and witness how Heinrich is transported into a time warp when, like a latter-day Rip van Winkle, he only realizes on his return to civilization that he has been away for thirty years instead of a few weeks. On his journey, he imaginatively enters a deep-time zone of natural history that precedes the anthropocentric world from which he had escaped, but also bears witness to the environmental changes brought about in the Anthropocene. As he returns to civilization, he is confronted with new confusing inventions such as the computer, email, globalized travel, commerce, and communication, while at the same time suffering from an unceasing and ever-intensifying noise in his ears like the sound of rushing water – the noise of the melting glaciers whose symptoms he had witnessed in his excursion into the Arctic. The real and the imaginary are indissolubly mixed in this story of exit and return, and while the fantasmatic exploration of the wild is infused by the reality of ecological crisis, the realistic depiction of civilization is shot through with phantasmatic scenes and images from wild nature – as in the final scene of the novel, in which Heinrich is spotted to be followed by two wild animals, a fox and a stag, in the streets of Toronto, where he had finally met up with his sister, only to take leave again and continue on his unfinished search, accepting in the end his in-between position between past and present, the cultural ecosystems of humans and the natural ecosystems of the earth as his precarious condition of existence.

*The Search for Heinrich Schlögel* is thus not a linear but a multiply recursive, nonlinear narrative emerging from an archival imagination which both confirms and suspends the connections between self and other, human and nonhuman world, time and space, past and present that the novel is trying to explore. This search also involves a cross-cultural dimension. The title resonates with the Schlegel brothers as representatives of German romanticism, whose concept of *progressive Universalpoesie* (progressive universal poesy) clearly influenced the composition of Baillie's novel in its mixture of genres, its blending of poetic and philosophical language, of science and imagination, and in the fragmentary open-endedness of its search for knowledge and truth. It also resonates with the importance of translation that is central to the Schlegel brothers' notion of

philology, art and literature. Its evolving fictional archive is composed from both German and English sources, and extends its range to the Inuktitut language and culture which Heinrich Schlögel encounters on his journey. The legacy of German romanticism alluded to in the title is translated in the novel into a New World context in two ways—as a sensorium for the global impact of the Anthropocene on the natural world of the Arctic from an awareness of deep-time culture-nature coagency, and as an acknowledgement of the indigenous knowledge of nature in Inuktitut culture, whose representatives combine an exceptional resilience and ability to adapt to modernity with an awareness of the cultural dispossession and environmental damage that this modern lifestyle has brought about. It is in the contact with this indigenous knowledge and sensitivity that Heinrich's hearing of the melting glaciers intensifies to an ultimately unbearable noise at the end of the novel, which transgresses the textual attempt of an archival comprehension of the geo-ecological changes of the Anthropocene, and translates the derangement of the human scale which this entails from a linguistic into an embodied experience, from a semantics into a somatics of aesthetic communication.

As novels such as these show, alongside the other examples from different periods and literary styles that I have discussed in this essay, literature can contribute in important ways to the environmental humanities. It offers imaginative models of complex culture-nature interaction, which are a rich source of various directions of research and teaching at the interface of science and narrative, cultural and natural history, environmental and social justice, indigenous and cosmopolitan ecologies, postcolonial and transcultural studies, traditional narratives and narratives of the Anthropocene.

It goes without saying that these or similar observations are also applicable to other genres, media, and forms of cultural creativity. In the medium of film, the 2017 movie by Guillermo del Toro, *The Shape of Water*, is a case in point, and I want to conclude with this example because it is a highly condensed illustration of aesthetic processes as creative forms of a cultural ecology. In this film, a strange attraction and growing intimacy develops between a mute cleaning woman named Elisa Esposito and an amphibian hominid creature that has been abducted from its natural South American habitat and is being subjected to horrific experiments for purposes of military research in the high-security government laboratory in which she works. Both Elisa, who was born in the liminal space of a river shore, and the alien creature are associated with the element of water, which becomes a major semiotic agency in the film that eludes and transgresses the rigid control of a biophobic civilization represented in the prison-like dystopia of the laboratory. This fluid force of transformative contact, which coemerges with their intensifying relationship, counteracts the

systemic repressions of a Cold War mindset personified in the leader of the secret experiment, Richard Strickland, whose aggressive claim to social normality goes along with a completely depersonalized, self-eliminating sense of duty and discipline. Together with her gay neighbor, her African American friend, and a defected Russian spy who discovers his scientific ethos, Elisa manages to free the amphibian man from the tank in which he is enchained, and hides him from Strickland's furious fanaticism in the bathroom of her private apartment. The transspecies erotic romance which develops in this unlikely environment is a phantasmatic condensation of the ecological forces that the film as a whole activates against a xenophobic culture based on a rigid ideology of white supremacist nationalism, which is depicted as an imprisoning wasteland, a 'stricken land' and culture of death whose toxic atmosphere poisons all lives and relationships under its control. The regenerative energies that this ecological counterdiscourse supplies for the self-renewal of the cultural ecosystem are symbolically expressed in the magical self-healing power of the water monster, whose influence also bodily revivifies those in his contact sphere and bestows on them unknown resources of vitality, courage, solidarity, and civil disobedience. In the end, this regenerative force survives even after Elisa's death, who is killed by Strickland in her attempt to save her beloved stranger from destruction but is resurrected dancing with him into the fluid medium of an oceanic imagination — which is of course the imaginary power of the film itself and of the various forms of cultural creativity that it incorporates.

This conflict between biophobic and biophilic forces that drives the film's creative process is staged within a multiplicity of aesthetic codes that are supplied by the archives of literature, film, music, painting, and dance. Framed retrospectively in the tone of a fairy tale by the voice-over of Elisa's gay friend, the film quite conspicuously draws on narrative sources from ancient mythology, from elemental poetics and tales of sea nymphs, water spirits, and human-animal metamorphosis, but also on filmic adaptations of these sources as well as on a broad repertoire of TV shows, musicals, and performances, and especially on jazz which the mute Elisa uses as a means of nonverbal communication to bridge the gap of semiotic codes. In this multigeneric interplay of stories, images, and sounds, the film activates the archives of cultural creativity in ways that link the cultural memory to the evolutionary memory of the human species, restoring the values of love and empathy to the paralyzing divisions of society and envisioning a more sustainable form of life from the biophilic reconnection of humans to the living community of all creatures.

The film, which won four Oscars, shows that the ecological archives of literature and art are still very much alive in contemporary culture. As a cross-medial fable of ecological renewal in an anthropocenic dystopia, *The Shape of Water* is

a critical intervention in a cultural imaginary in which forms of domination, repression and xenophobic nationalism resurface on the political scene. The film lends itself to productive readings in terms of environmental justice, of queer and postcolonial ecologies, of biosemiotics, of material ecocriticism, and of cultural sustainability studies, thus demonstrating the considerable relevance of art and literature for various domains of the environmental humanities.

## Notes

- 1 Originally coined by Paul Ricoeur, the phrase “hermeneutics of suspicion” has gained new critical relevance in current debates about more constructive forms of literary studies as advocated, among others, by Rita Felski in “Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion.”
- 2 See, e.g., Ruffin.
- 3 *The Black Book*. Ed. Roger Furman, Middleton Harris, Morris Levitt and Ernst Smith. New York: Random House, 1974.
- 4 The ecocritical significance of water as a transformative force in African American literature is pointed out, e.g., by Wardi.

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## Verzeichnis der Autorinnen und Autoren

*Paul Buchholz*  
Department of German Studies  
Modern Languages, Emory University  
532 Kilgo Circle  
Atlanta, GA 30322  
USA  
paul.joseph.buchholz@emory.edu

*Jason Groves*  
Department of Germanics  
University of Washington  
Box 353130  
Seattle, WA 98195-3130  
USA  
jagroves@uw.edu

*Jack Davis*  
Truman State University  
McClain Hall 321  
100 E. Normal Ave  
Kirksville, MO 63501  
USA  
jackdavis@truman.edu

*Joela Jacobs*  
Department of German Studies  
University of Arizona  
1512 E. First St.  
Tucson, AZ 85721  
USA  
joelajacobs@arizona.edu

*Ian Fleishman*  
Germanic Languages and Literatures  
University of Pennsylvania  
745 Williams Hall  
255 South 36th Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19104  
USA  
fleis@sas.upenn.edu

*Jens Klenner*  
Department of German  
Bowdoin College  
7700 College Station  
Brunswick, ME 04011  
USA  
jklenner@bowdoin.edu

*Gundolf Graml*  
SUMMIT Global Learning and Leadership Development  
Agnes Scott College  
141 East College Avenue  
Decatur, GA 30030  
USA  
ggraml@agnesscott.edu

*Tanja Nusser*  
Department of German Studies  
University of Cincinnati  
2600 Clifton Ave.  
Cincinnati, OH 45221-0372  
USA  
tanja.nusser@uc.edu



*Seth Peabody*

Department of German and Russian  
Carleton College  
1 North College Street  
Northfield, MN 55057  
USA  
speabody@carleton.edu

*Hubert Zapf*

Bozener Strasse 07  
86316 Friedberg  
Germany  
hubert.zapf@philhist.uni-augsburg.de

*Caroline Schaumann*

563 Grove Street  
Bishop, CA 93514  
USA  
cschaum@emory.edu

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