CATRIN GERSDORF
JULIANE BRAUN (Eds.)

America After Nature
Democracy, Culture, Environment

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Heidelberg
To Eva Hedrich
and all the other invisible
brains and hands behind projects like this.
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Introduction
Democracy after Nature: National Legacies, Global Futures

The year 1989 marked a crucial moment in the history of nature and democracy. The fall of the Berlin Wall in November of that year confirmed the power of democracy to topple dictatorial regimes. In hindsight, it also heralded the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the era of globalization. Earlier that same year, American environmentalist Bill McKibben brought attention to another challenge of the time, one that had, in fact, played no small part in the erosion of the ossified ideology and practice of Realsozialismus (real socialism): the ecological crisis caused by the production of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. McKibben was convinced that the particles and substances, the fumes and the smog “we” produce “in our pursuit of a better life” (n. pag.) and insert into the atmospheric and geological systems of planet Earth had brought about The End of Nature—at least of nature as an independent force. “When I say that we have ended nature,” he writes,

I don’t mean, obviously, that natural processes have ceased—there is still sunshine and still wind, still growth, still decay. Photosynthesis continues, as does respiration. But we have ended the thing that has, at least in modern times, defined nature for us—its separation from human society. (McKibben n. pag.)

This definition of nature as the material reality shaped by biochemical, physical, and atmospheric processes on the one hand, and as an entity separate from human society on the other hand reveals McKibben’s intellectual debt to a tradition that can be traced back in American thought to Ralph Waldo Emerson.
In 1836, Emerson had defined nature in similar terms, even using a similar language. Philosophically, nature was “all that is separate from us,” all that is distinguished in theory “as the NOT Me” (3–4). In contrast, “Nature in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf” (4; emphasis in the original). Writing in the early nineteenth century, under the influence of Romanticism and at the dawn of the industrial age, Emerson recognizes the transformative power of art—both in the sense of artisanship and of imaginative creativity—when he writes about the “mixture” of human will with material nature embodied in “a house, a canal, a statue, a picture” (4). Yet on the grand canvas of the natural world, these “operations” remained “insignificant” (4), an almost invisible scratch in an otherwise unblemished picture. In the closing sentence of “Nature,” Emerson seems to strike a rather different tone when he conjures up “the kingdom of man over nature, which cometh not with observation” (39). Is this a call for the large-scale transformation of nature into culture? A call to Americans to embrace the Herculean task of appropriating nature’s vast domains in this, the New World by mixing their will with the material nature? Whatever the answer, and whatever the critical position that answer reveals, it is obvious that Emerson privileged nature over history as the source that would build and nourish a genuinely American character, both on the individual and the communal, or national level.

We find echoes of that precept—the significance of a force that is more powerful than history, tradition, and convention—in Henry David Thoreau’s celebration of (natural) wildness as an antidote against the individual’s domestication in the shops and offices of modern America. “I prefer not to,” Bartleby’s monotone rejection of the demands of a monotone office job, is the remnant of the nonconformist wild in the domesticated grid of the modern city. It breathes the spirit of freedom in an environment ruled by law, social convention, and economic necessity. Similarly, Walt Whitman perceived “the lessons of variety and freedom” as “the greatest lessons of Nature through the universe” (953). In the opening thoughts of Democratic Vistas, the text that is Whitman’s response to the devastating experience of the Civil War and its aftermath, the poet draws on the authority of the laws of nature—and on an intellectual tradition that found expression in the text of the Declaration of Independence but reaches back to the era of classical antiquity, more specifically, to ideas first formulated by the Greek philosopher Epicurus and later verified by Roman poet Lucretius.

Based on the Epicurean valorization of pleasure and joy, rather than pain and fear, as the most natural of all human pursuits, Lucretius promoted an ethics of independence and of freedom from despotism and superstition. An advocate of atomism, he saw nature first and foremost as matter in motion, not as an expression of divine providence or retribution. In De rerum natura (The Nature of Things) he wrote: “Nature is her own mistress and is exempt from the oppression of arrogant despots, accomplishing everything by herself spontaneously and independently and free from the jurisdiction of gods” (qtd. in Johnson and Wilson, 131). The emancipatory potential of Epicurean thought as expressed in metaphors and images like the ones just quoted is obvious: The idea that gods play no part in the doings of nature provided a model for philosophical and political ideas of independence. Epicurean thought provided a blueprint for articulating doubts about the raison d’être of established social hierarchies and political orders while at the same time, it established the inherent equality of all things material, including human bodies. As Duke law professor Jedediah Purdy summarized the position: “all people were made of the same matter and had the same life spans and appetites” (59).

What Purdy calls “the equality of appetite” (60) refers to a crucial component of Epicureanism that reemerges in seventeenth and eighteenth-century natural rights philosophy and, ultimately, in the United States Declaration of Independence: the physiological relationship of all humans, their equality as ‘natural’ beings which legitimizes their legal and political equality. With the Declaration of Independence, and the

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1 A. E. Stallings’s more recent translation suggested this paraphrase of the passage quoted above: “If you possess a firm grasp of these tenets [of physics expounded in Book II: “The Dance of the Atoms”], you will see / That Nature, rid of harsh taskmasters, all at once is free, / And everything she does, does on her own, so that gods play / No part” (Lucretius 2007, 68).

2 In his Leviathan (1651), Thomas Hobbes defined the law of nature (lex naturale) as “a precept, or general rule, found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do, that, which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same” (86). In contrast, the right of nature (jus naturale) “is the liberty each man hath, to use his own power, as he will himself,
political pamphlets, essays, and declarations that prepared it, Epicurean nature, filtered through the poetry of Lucretius and the philosophical work of European thinkers such as Michel de Montaigne, Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke, becomes the foundation for the conceptual architecture of the twin pillars of modern democracy and America.¹ We find emulations and modifications of this architecture everywhere in the literature of the early Republic and in the lectures, essays, autobiographies, poems, and novels of the nineteenth century. And we have learned to read the work of American transcendentalists, all of whom were fascinated by the idea as well as the experience of nature, as invaluable contributions to the development of the nation’s cultural and political independence.⁴

Late twentieth-century Americanist revisions of the era Matthiessen had dubbed the American Renaissance de-emphasized the significance of nature, instead focusing on the political and ideological substructure of that era’s canon and on its participation in, or resistance against, the construction of race and gender hierarchies. Nature was no longer seen as a liberatory instrument but, rather, as a concept complicit in legitimizing regimes based on the ideologies of racism and sexism. As Jonathan Dollimore pointed out in a different context, any political philosophy or movement that draws on nature needs to be aware “that much reaction-for the preservation of his own nature; that is to say, of his own life” (86). Because the law of nature applies to all men equally, all have the same right to stave off threats against their lives. This is not a call for violence and war. For Hobbes, “the first, and fundamental law of nature, . . . is to seek peace, and follow it.” The “sum of the right of nature; which is, by all means we can, to defend ourselves” (87; emphasis in the original) is second only to the fundamental lex naturals. In order to prevent unnecessary violence and war, human societies need to be regulated by contracts, or, as Hobbes called it, a “Pact, or Covenant” (89).

³ For an extended discussion of the links between Epicureanism and the real story of America’s philosophical origins see Stewart, ch. 3 “Epicurus’s Dangerous Idea.” For further references to the influence of Epicureanism on the development of ideas and concepts of democracy see also Purdy, esp. 65-69; Zucker, 87-89.

⁴ See the seminal contributions to the American Studies project by F. O. Matthiessen and Perry Miller.

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ary thought will return on the backs” of that concept (qtd. in Soper, 119). Or as Jedediah Purdy formulates it: “Treating humanity as just ‘part of nature’ has fostered racism, imperialism, and fascism, which imagined social life through a corrupted Darwinian triumphalism” (279). Making a similar (Foucauldian) argument, Paul Outka criticizes the classificatory systems of nineteenth-century ethnography for “[emplacing] various ‘racial’ groups according to their distance from the bestial, the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ or ‘Teutonic,’ or ‘Aryan’ almost always occupied the top and the African the bottom, the place nearest the animal” (7). As important as critical interventions like Outka’s are because they emphasize African Americans’ complex, often traumatic experience of nature, they often neglect the strategic use of the concept in the rhetoric of emancipation and nineteenth-century African American liberation. For example, a brief look at Frederick Douglass’s The Heroic Slave (1853) will demonstrate how at least one African American writer employs some of the strategies of nineteenth-century nature writing for narrating Black emancipatory ideas. In his novella, Douglass stages the Kantian Auffassung der Natur, the observation of nature and animals, as the precept of self-emancipation. In a crucial scene, the protagonist enacts the role of the naturalist (or scientist) who registers concrete natural phenomena and, subsequently, extrapolates ‘truths’ about the human condition, or rather about the situation of the Black subject under the condition of chattel slavery.⁵ By articulating the abolitionist claim for African American participation in the democratic project of the United States through images of nature, Douglass also participated in a tradition that arguably went into hiatus toward the end of the nineteenth century: the rhetorical and ideological imbrication of nature, democracy, and America.

One of the last texts that addressed the philosophical and imaginative codependence of these three concepts is Whitman’s Democratic Vistas. In this prose piece, Whitman modernizes the political tenets of natural rights philosophy by affiliating them with the Darwinian idea of natural variety while at the same time reminding his fellow Americans of their

⁵ I make a more detailed argument, based on a close reading of Douglass’s novella in a yet unpublished conference paper on “Risk and Nature in the Work of Frederick Douglass.” CG
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automatically required to address questions about race, class, gender, and sexuality" (174), it could also be interpreted more sympathetically, as a concern about the future of democracy. “We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning,” McKeibben writes. “Nature’s independence is its meaning; without it there is nothing but us” (n. pag.; emphasis in the original). In 1989, the word Anthropocene, describing the new epoch in which the human species emerges “as a globally potent biogeophysical force, capable of leaving a durable imprint in the geological record” (Revi, in n. pag.), did not yet enjoy the same critical currency as it does today. But McKeibben’s was one of the first voices that addressed the cultural, political, social, and psychological challenges of the Anthropocene.

The questions and problems outlined above offer a historical and intellectual frame for reading the individual chapters in this volume. The essays collected in the first section, KEYNOTES, are based on four plenary lectures that provided the conference participants with the general parameters for discussions in the workshops. FRANK ZELKO echoes Bruno Latour’s claim that “we have never been modern” when he takes issue with the Weberian thesis of modernity as a disenchanted mode of existence. In Zelko’s historical account, ecological holism appears as a transnational body of thought that “helped to mitigate the spiritual and existential disorientation of modernity.” Far from being merely an esoteric, or even necrophiliac celebration of nature, ecological holism recognizes “the ineluctable logic of science and reason” as one, but not the only way modern humans relate to the natural world. It is, as Zelko writes, “a form of disenchanted enchantment.” Worried about the public inaction on climate change, JOHN MEYER investigates how the debates on climate and sustainability are framed, asking to what degree that determines if people can be moved to action. Meyer acknowledges the problematic us-versus-them divide—i.e., the divide between us, the concerned and responsible environmentalists and them, the larger populace of ignorant and selfish individuals—as one impediment to the popu-

6 Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer’s pivotal essay on “The ‘Anthropocene’” that introduced the term to a larger public was published in the year 2000.
larization of environmentalist activism in the United States. However, the much greater problem is what he calls the “resonance dilemma,” the priority of more immediate and individual concerns such as jobs and job security, education, and the cost of living. Meyer offers what he calls an “environmentalism of everyday life” as a form to address the resonance dilemma. One way of linking larger issues such as global climate change and sustainability with local, regional, or national expressions of everyday life is through matters of justice, a topic picked up in JULIE SZE’s contribution. Discussing a number of art projects concerned with “issues of environmental inequality,” Sze seeks to draw attention to race, class, and geographical location as factors that determine the degree to which people are affected by the “catastrophe of climate change.” At the same time, Sze questions the viability of the Anthropocene as a category for addressing the current ecological crisis. The assumption of human-induced changes in the discourse of the Anthropocene often fails to take into account “inequalities of agency, responsibility, impacts and vulnerabilities.” Not all people, societies, and cultures are equally responsible for nature’s massive restructuring. Like Meyer and Sze, SYLVIA MAYER is concerned with questions of climate change representation and communication. Focusing on the political, historical, and cultural context of the US, she traces the emergent genre of the climate change novel and explores its contributions to the larger discourse on global risk. Mayer’s account, narrative fiction emerges as a cultural tool for imaginatively experiencing the individual, social, and emotional as well as the ecological consequences of the sensually elusive phenomena of climate change and risk.

The essays in section two, THE POLITICS OF NATURE, explore political and policy issues related to the environment and reveal how these issues shape social, ecological, and teaching practices in the postnatural world. SASCHA PÖHLMANN investigates how the characteristics, rules, and principles of nature can productively inform the creation of political and social concepts. Analyzing Walt Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” Pöhlmann examines the poem’s construction of time, arguing that poetic performances of the future ultimately help Whitman envision a transtemporal democracy. In “Pesticides and the Transformation of the National Audubon Society,” MICHELLE MART traces the US government’s policies on the use of chemical pesticides and explores how one of the US’s most prominent conservationist organizations positioned itself toward this environmental threat. Mart contends that it was the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring that caused a shift in the Audubon Society’s stance toward pesticide use and ultimately inspired the organization to strategically recommend moderation, rather than condemning pesticide use outright. This policy of restraint, Mart argues, ensured Audubon’s long-term success and established the organization as a powerful force in American environmental debates. GESA MACKENTHUN’s contribution considers the status of Native Americans in current debates surrounding ecology and the environment. Dismantling both the myth of the ecological Indian and the myth of the unecological Indian, Mackenthun’s essay argues for an in-depth analysis of the cultural work myths perform and, even more importantly, for the close scrutiny of those who benefit from the creation and dissemination of such myths. Exploring current trends in the EFL classroom, LAURENZ VOLKMANN calls for the inclusion of ecocritical and ecodidactic perspectives in the discipline’s recent turn to transcultural and globalized learning. Volkmann contends that ecological concerns should not simply be addressed as isolated phenomena, but can also productively inform classroom discussions of other issues, such as migration, multiculturalism, and the world economy. Recognizing the versatility and importance of ecodidactics for the EFL classroom, Volkmann suggests, will help negotiate the politics of curricula and textbook development.

The essays in the third section, ECOSYSTEMS AND URBAN ENVIRONMENTS, uncover the ways in which questions of ecology are discussed in urban environments. BORIS VORMANN’s article critiques the current discourse on sustainability in the city. He exposes the inadequacy of technology-based approaches as a possible solution to the problems of urban centers, while also pointing to the shortcomings of strategies that focus solely on the improvement of social interaction. Vormann instead proposes a third perspective, one that advocates for the creation of sustainable urban infrastructures, and argues that only a dual focus on human interaction and technology will allow cities to thrive. In “Artistic Negotiations of the Right to the City,” EMANUEL TRISTAN KUGLAND explores the idea of the commons and applies it to his analysis of Brian Wood’s comic book series DMZ. Kugland identifies intellectual property and ecology as important catalysts for political dissent, while also arguing that DMZ’s narratological strategy undermines the very engagement with ecology and politics that the series’ thematic focus had
seemingly called for. Integrating rural and urban environments, FRANK MEHRING’S reading of Walden elucidates the relevance of Thoreau’s 1854 book for today’s city dwellers. Routing his own analysis of the visual elements in Walden through John Cage’s musical interpretation of the work, Mehring develops the concept of the “Walden State of Mind,” a way of actively and mindfully perceiving one’s environment that allows busy urbanites to leave the stresses of the city behind. In “Hip-Hop Life Writing and African American Urban Ecology,” NASSIM W. BALESTRINI also explores the role of music in urban environments and examines its centrality in African American artistic expression. Carefully unpacking the metapoetics and multimedia practices emerging from Jay Z’s autobiography Decoded, Balestirni’s essay reveals the impact and reach of hip hop life writing as an art form for a variety of audiences while underscoring the critical importance of a black perspective on urban ecologies.

The fourth section, VISUALIZING NATURE, investigates how photographs, dioramas, collages, and literary works that use graphic elements engage with questions of ecology, the making (or un-making) of disaster, and the potential for a greener future. In “Nature, Media Culture, and the Transcendentalist Quest for the Real,” HEIKE SCHÄFER analyzes the influence of early photography on the writings of Emerson and Whitman and offers one example of how new technologies affect literary practice. Schäfer suggests that by providing a critical vocabulary and a material window into the immediate representation of nature, photography led both writers to develop a nuanced theory of perception and signification that powerfully informed their works and led them to ultimately rethink the spiritual, cultural, and political function of literature. J. JESSE RAMÍREZ also considers the role of photography for the representation of environmental realities. Examining the works of diorama artist Lori Nix and George Stewart’s novel Earth Abides, Ramírez interrogates the critical purchase of a concept he terms “apocalyptic jouissance” and argues for its transformative powers in the post-national and post-ecological United States. In “A Photo Album of History: Ekphrasis in Jamaica Kincaid’s My Garden (Book),” ANTONIA PURK focuses on the relationship between verbal and visual representations of the garden in Kincaid’s work. Purk reads the garden as a kind of palimpsest that, upon close investigation, reveals issues of colonization, representation, and visuality. Purk argues that, through her use of ekphrasis in particu-
Tischleder approaches “garbage as the American consumer society’s true legacy” and sheds a critical light on WALL-E’s failure to articulate a more radical ecological critique of modern American culture’s wasteful consumption of natural resources. With her essay on Flarf, arguably the first avant-garde literary movement of the twenty-first century, MARY-ANN SNYDER-KÖRBER enters the postnatural space of the world wide web. Based on a highly productive synthesis of Jakob von Uexküll’s definition of Umwelt (environment) as a “subjectively angled” spatial phenomenon and Marcella Durand’s proposal to develop an ecopoetic theory that pays attention to the organic and the inorganic, the natural and the artificial components of our environments, Snyder-Körber reads Flarf “as an analytical category able to launch a productively expanded ecopoetics.” As a movement whose agents recycle, reuse, and reappropriate “e-detritus,” Flarf is undergirded by an anti-Romantic, postnatural aesthetic, and as such, perhaps the most authentic literary expression of America after nature.

The United States is still a major agent in global politics. But twenty-first-century American attitudes about nature and wilderness, about global warming and the consequences of climate change, about energy production and consumption, and large-scale food production will have to compete with those of other global players, with big ones such as China, Russia, and the European Union, and small ones such as the national islands and archipelagos in the Caribbean, and the Pacific and Indian Oceans that form the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). Yet for the foreseeable future, American ideas about nature and its relationship to culture will continue to shape the institutions and structures that define and enact environmental policies world-wide. Democracy is the only form of government based on ethical and legal principles that hold the promise of equality and justice for all. As Cornel West suggests, the realization of the democratic project depends on overcoming the “fear to engage the world and learn from others” (77). With this volume we trace the American contours and the global dimensions of an ongoing experiment in democracy in a postnatural world.

