Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies
vol. 5, no. 2, 2024, pp. 131–41
doi: 10.47060/jaaas.v5i2.212

Introduction: Notes on the Relation of Narrative, Environment, and Social Justice

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ABSTRACT

The idea for this *JAAAS* special issue comes from the 49th Annual Conference of the Austrian Association for American Studies, which took place at the University of Salzburg in Fall 2022. Presentations covered stories we tell about our environment, and about pressing social issues of the past or present. As varied as the presentations were, the common thread was inquiring into how we – as individuals and collectives – frame our experiences in these areas through narratives, to whom we tell them, and when, where, and why. The contributions here range in their treatment of subject matter from speculative prose to theater, from film to poetry, to a history of the advertising industry. They illustrate how issues of social justice, climate change, and storytelling are intimately linked, and explore various manifestations of this nexus in fresh and surprising ways.

KEYWORDS

Climate change, narrative theory, ecocriticism, American studies, North American literature, film

Scene 1: On 1 February 2017, North Dakota police arrested 76 activists at Standing Rock. Protests against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline were largely carried out by Native American grassroots organizations. The arrest took place after some protesters had established a camp near the construction side. While a spokesperson for the Morton County sheriff's office "claimed that a 'rogue group of protesters' had trespassed on private property," Linda Black Elk, a member of the local Catawba Nation, took an opposing standpoint: "We basically started to see police mobilizing from all directions. Someone came along and told us we had about 15 minutes before the camp would get raided" (qtd. in Levin).

Scene 2: On 23 September 2019, climate activist Greta Thunberg spoke at the United Nations Climate Action Summit in New York. The initiator of the Fridays for Future movement accused the assembled world leaders of ignorance and passivity in the face of accelerated climate change: "People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!" (qtd. in NPR staff). Then-President Donald Trump made fun of her by tweeting: "She seems like a very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future. So nice to see!" (qtd. in Lyons). Thunberg, in turn, subtly mocked Trump by updating her Twitter profile – "A very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future" (qtd. in Greve) – thereby appropriating the sarcastic characterization (see also Nordensvard and Ketola).

Scene 3: In late May 2021, the remains of 215 Indigenous children were discovered at a former residential school in British Columbia, Canada. One of the largest educational facilities of its kind, the Kamloops Indian Residential School was part of the Canadian Indian residential school system which aimed at forcibly assimilating Indigenous children into white Canadian mainstream society. While leading Canadian politicians were publicly "horrified and heartbroken" (Austen) about the discovery, representatives of the Indigenous community were less astonished by the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism. In a statement, the CEO of the First Nations Health Authority, Richard Jock, made clear: "That this situation exists is sadly not a surprise and illustrates the damaging and lasting impacts that the residential school system continues to have on First Nations people, their families and communities" (qtd. in Dickson and Watson).

Given the medial omnipresence of our current polycrisis, we could present here an infinite list of similar scenes pertaining to the climate crisis and social (in)justice. The issues negotiated in such scenes, however, are never *not* political, even if a particular news item obfuscates its political nature and ideological underpinning to come across as 'mere fact,' 'naked information' or 'just objective.' The effectiveness of political

mobilization, then, comes down to the crucial question of which side tells the most convincing stories and offers the most engaging narrative frames. To reappropriate Bill Clinton's unofficial 1992 campaign slogan, "It's the narrative, stupid!"

The idea for this *JAAAS* special issue comes from the 49th Annual Conference of the Austrian Association for American Studies, which took place at the University of Salzburg in Fall 2022. Under the heading "Narrative, Environment, Social Justice" we solicited presentations on stories we tell about our environment, and about pressing social issues of the past or present. As varied as the presentations were, the common thread was inquiring into how we – as individuals and collectives – frame our experiences in these areas through narratives, to whom we tell them, and when, where, and why. Before introducing the texts collected in this special issue, let us briefly point to some of the key developments of the nexus narrative, environment, and social justice.

In recent decades, the two arguably most famous dictums undergirding poststructuralism – the author is dead and the text is above all – have themselves died, or considerably faded from the spotlight of discourses in the humanities. Our field has become preoccupied with the relation of the *world out there* and the *text in there*, with, as Rita Felski puts it, "real-world consequences" of literary and cultural artifacts (5). In this context, ecocriticism emerged as the approach par excellence, occupied with the "relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii) in general, and "between 'nature' and 'culture' and of the inherent ideologies of that relationship" in particular (Gerhardt and Grewe-Volpp 413). What distinguished this perspective from other literary theories when it became institutionalized in the 1990s was its focus on the "physical environment" and on "nature." Ecocriticism, in the words of Cheryll Glotfelty, "expands the notion of 'the world' to include the entire ecosphere" (xix).

Early ecocritical scholarship mapped the relation of narrative and environment by focusing on nature writing, a genre hitherto rather neglected in both the literary canon and literary criticism. Although by no means neglected, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and his entire oeuvre underwent a slight re-evaluation with more priority given to their quality as environmental texts *avant la lettre*. Lawrence Buell's seminal 1995 study *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, for instance, put forward the thesis that Thoreau's spiritual quest for a more authentic form of life in his cabin at Walden Pond materialized a "more 'ecocentric' way of being" (1). According to Buell, this literal and literary being-in-nature, far from epitomizing merely one individual's experiences, shaped the entire nation's environmental imagination in the nineteenth century (see also Nash; Kelleter; Winkler).

How, then, do environmental texts have an effect on both individual reader and collective culture? Alexa Weik von Mossner interrogates the nexus of narrative and environment by pointing to the implicit assumption that canonical nature writing such as Thoreau's, "according to Buell, had an affective impact not only on specific readers but on American society as a whole. This implies that the affective and rational understanding of readers . . . can be shaped or at least influenced by environmental narrative" ("Environmental Narrative, Embodiment, and Emotion" 534). While early ecocriticism operated on and took for granted this implicit assumption, contemporary scholarship has for the most part failed to explore how texts are constructed to achieve their assumed impacts on readers. To counter this, Weik von Mossner developed an econarratological approach "that draws on relevant scholarship in cognitive science, affective narratology, and the psychology of fiction" with the aim of considering "both *empathetic* emotions that are evoked as human and nonhuman protagonists move through storyworlds, cueing readers to feel along with them, and *direct* emotions that readers experience in response to the virtual environment of a storyworld" (535–36).

Weik von Mossner's *Affective Ecologies* demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of current ecocritical scholarship, with her narratological take primarily rooted in Erin James's influential considerations. James's 2015 *The Storyworld Accord* fused ecocritical and narratological perspectives into the new field of econarratology, which she characterizes as driven by "ecocriticism's interest in the relationship between literature and the physical environment [and] narratology's focus on the literary structures and devices by which writers compose narratives" (xv; see also Weik von Mossner "Environmental Narrative, Embodiment, and Emotion" 535). While *The Storyworld Accord* focused on postcolonial texts and frameworks, James's later work in *Narrative in the Anthropocene* engaged with Amitav Ghosh's dictum that "the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (9). Both Weik von Mossner and James represent a current strain of ecocritical scholarship aiming to explore, with narratological tools, the emotionalizing – effective and affect-evoking – structures and working mechanisms of (environmental) texts.

Notions of affect and affectivity provide a key for better understandings of how environments are narrated in texts as they reverberate in individual and collective readers and their worlds. Affective ecocriticism further re-conceptualizes relations between world and text by taking more seriously the narrativity of the world out there and how it affects the embodiment of human and more-than-human beings. Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino, who pioneer this approach, conceive the affective perspective as enabling us to identify

> emotions that circulate around environmental issues today, to clarify how that circulation works, to acknowledge the powerful role environments themselves play in shaping affective experience, and to identify new affects emerging in our contemporary moment. (3)

This theoretical framework rests on a productive synthesis of affect theory – developing Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's take on "intensities," "becomings," and "assemblages" (see Gregg and Seigworth) – with the ecocritical reconsideration of the effects the (natural) environment has on texts and vice versa. It is environments, after all, that make possible the emergence of affect as an "asignifying, precognitive bodily feeling, an 'intensity' or a perpetual state of 'becoming'" (Bladow and Ladino 5) and these particular environments are themselves affected by such economies and circulations.

The fusion of affect theory and ecocriticism enables us to zoom in on "the many non-narrative affective triggers in our everyday environments – the weather, built spaces, nonhuman animals, and objects with which we inhabit the world" which "deserve assessment in terms of their emotional impacts" (Bladow and Ladino 3). Bladow and Ladino conceptualize such affects as the all-encompassing environmental sphere which always already enfolds us in what Martin Heidegger calls our "being-in-the-world" (78–122). As "embodied capacities," that is as "phenomena that arise and circulate as intensities among assemblages" (Bladow and Ladino 6), affects are akin to the atmosphere, the climate, or the weather while they also 'petrify' and materialize in concrete emotions, affecting the individual. Inherently political, affective economies and circulations equally entail a utopian potential, as Bladow and Ladino point out: "Perhaps looking for micro-moments of affective intersection and building from them may be one small way forward in a political atmosphere of bubbles, divides, and seemingly entrenched polarization" (3).

Having highlighted some perspectives on the nexus of text and world, we might take into account broader conceptions of environment to go from affective ecocriticism to the relation of affects and social justice. "Atmosphere," "climate," and "weather" are concepts tied to the meteorological conditions of an actual environment – but they are also much more than that. In her 2016 *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Christina Sharpe politicizes established notions around these concepts. For Sharpe, "the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack" (104). Atmosphere, here, transcends the realm of the meteorological as it affects us in a more holistic manner. In the development of her historical argument, Sharpe delves into the context of the mid-nineteenth-century United States, when, before the US Civil War, about four million black men, women, and children were enslaved. In 1850,

> after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act that "free air" of a "free state" is denied to those in the hold who would take their freedom; slavery is enforced as the law of the entire United States. Its atmospheric density increased; slavery undeniably became the total environment. (104)

The weather in this metaphorical sense of a deadly all-encompassing racial atmosphere had gotten worse for African Americans in the US, North and South alike.

Sharpe's broad conception of weather makes visible both affects perpetuating and underlying the racial climate, as well as the depersonalized, apparently incomprehensible categories of systemic and institutional racism. The diagnosis – "antiblackness is pervasive *as* climate" not just as weather (106) – thus also characterizes the moment of her writing in 2016. Antiblackness as climate is not shaping the political and cultural imaginary only, but, in turn, inherently meshed with meteorological climate and, significantly, with the phenomenon of climate change. This often unnoticed nexus is epitomized in a slogan which has recently been employed by different stakeholders such as Amnesty International, Black Lives Matter, and *Time* magazine: "Climate Justice is Racial Justice" (Amnesty International; Black Lives Matter; Lammy and Bapna). The environmental justice movement tries to put this insight into practice and attempts to "challenge the use of the term 'nature' as a category unmarked by race, class, or gender and to reconnect discussions of nature to question [sic] of community, urban, and racial justice" (Sze and Chau 180). When, as proposed at the beginning of this introduction, media coverage of issues pertaining to the climate crisis and social (in)justice is never *not* political, we can also identify those who are more responsible for and those who are more affected by its consequences.[1] It is the politically, socially, and economically marginalized segments of populations both in the Global South and North that suffer disproportionally from the life-threatening effects of climate change, environmental pollution, and related issues. In that respect, environmental justice activists speak of "environmental racism," a concept employed to "more accurately describe . . . environmental policies and industry practices that provide benefits to whites while shifting costs to people of color" (Alston 105).

The contributions to this special issue of *JAAAS* range in their treatment of subject matter from speculative prose to theater, from film to poetry, to a history of the advertising industry. As highlighted above, issues of social justice and climate change are intimately linked, much as presenting news to the public about the dangers of plastic waste, global heating, ocean acidification, or over-consumption is, in turn, equally linked with issues of narrative form. The contributions in this special issue explore various manifestations of this nexus in fresh and surprising ways.

[1] Greta Olson explores the narrativity and narratives around the nexus of social (in)justice and gender in numerous of her works; see for instance "Legal Facts, Affective Truths, and Changing Narratives in Trials Involving Sexual Assault."

Marina Pingler's essay focuses on the "colonial Anthropocene" as it relates to a recent novel by Anishinaabe-Canadian author Waubgeshig Rice. While we may think of the beginning of the Anthropocene as something recent (or something only just now beginning), Pingler's essay makes clear the epoch can perhaps best be linked, or even traced to, the year 1492. Pingler's analysis stresses that thinking about social justice and the environment is work that, particularly in North America, involves examining traces of the past, as much as thinking about the future.

Markus Schwarz's contribution focuses on an imaginary future, and what hope it holds for thinking about the future's present. His reading of Catherynne M. Valente's *The Past Is Red* blends the thoughts of several theorists engaged in ideas of how hope itself can actually be harmful, and how real environmental protection and human rights activities might best focus on the beauty of what exists *now*, even in the midst of environmental catastrophe.

Nassim Balestrini's article turns to Canadian playwright Chantal Bildoeau's 2022 *No More Harveys*, whose title itself plays on an infamous figure in the #MeToo movement and the disastrous 2017 hurricane. Working with Caroline Levine's New Formalist literary studies methods, Balestrini discusses a "three-world approach" toward regions of the globe disjointed in their economic disparity, and how onstage metalepsis can be used to link developed and less-developed regions in contemporary North American activist theater.

Johannes Vith examines how visual landscapes 'speak' in the filmic narrative of James Benning's 1986 *Landscape Suicide*. Does collective trauma inhere in landscapes which witnessed violence? Again, metalepsis comes into play as Vith describes visual juxtapositions in the film of two sites of murders, one wealthy, middle-class, one less privileged.

Klaus Rieser likewise tracks filmic techniques presenting landscapes less as backgrounds than as ideological. In Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland* (2020), he argues, the agency of characters left behind in the wake of post-industrialization situates them as placemakers, allowing them to form new identities in states of precarity and transition.

Lukas Hellmuth looks at the roots of horror film tropes and narrative techniques as they are reflected, or rejected, in Ari Aster's 2018 *Hereditary*. Working with Lauren Berlant's notions of cruel optimism and Jack Halberstam's queer theory, Hellmuth's readings of the film and its predecessors in the horror genre encourage readers and viewers to examine how affective experiences are based as much in culture as in narrative event, and to think about alternative social structures, which may offer happier outcomes, or at least more equitable ones.

We are delighted to have younger scholars joining in this issue, with two short essays. Julia Machtenberg examines Sylvia Plath's 1962 "Fever 103˚," which, they

argue, has too long been read by framing Plath as a domestic figure, concerned with her own sphere as a mid-century US-American woman. Machtenberg's essay teases out this canonical poet's concerns about contemporary geopolitics and the environment. Ioana-Mihaela Cozac's "With Great Product Comes Great Responsibility: Marketing Gender and Eco-Responsibility" pulls a lens further out, discussing the history of misanthropic US advertising. Cozac's essay highlights twentieth- and twenty-first-century women's agency in purchasing power, in the face of the persistent "eco-gender gap." Finally, Martin Gabriel reviews a recent history of an area of North America currently undergoing rapid climate change, from a long-term perspective tracing the region back to its pre-human past.

We hope you find this issue thought-provoking, salient, and a wealth of reading and viewing resources. It's been a pleasure to work with this group of talented thinkers.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all our authors for their contributions and excellent cooperation in the process, our tireless, generous peer reviewers, without whose work the journal would not be possible, Maja Klostermann, *JAAAS*'s diligent editorial assistant, and the Journal's resourceful and ever-patient editor-in-chief, Cornelia Klecker. Additional thanks to Christoph Straub, who made us aware of the unimaginable crimes against humanity perpetuated within the Canadian Indian residential school system.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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