

Matter and Meaning. New Material Ecologies in Culture and History

September 30-Oktober 1, 2024

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Matter and Meaning is the second workshop in a sequence of three exploring the potential of a transregional collaboration between the Universities of Konstanz, Freiburg, Augsburg, Basel, and Zürich in the context of the Environmental Humanities.

Environmental Humanities is an interdisciplinary field responding to “the need for a more integrated and conceptually sensitive approach to environmental issues [...] and an effort to enrich environmental research with a more extensive conceptual vocabulary.”¹ Scholars in the field, coming both from the humanities and the social sciences, understand environmental challenges as “inextricable from social, cultural and human factors.”² Their overall aim is to use the expertise of the humanities and the social sciences to extend environmental sciences and today’s political debates on complex environmental challenges, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, or increasing contamination on a planetary scale. As an interdisciplinary and integrative field Environmental Humanities offers different avenues for thinking about human-environment relationships, which cluster around ‘political ecology’, ‘material ecology’, and ‘cultural ecology’.³

While the first workshop at the University of Konstanz focused on “political ecology” exploring connections between environmental change and political processes, resource conflicts, and environmental degradation, this second workshop *“matter and meaning”* hosted at the Environmental Science Center (WZU) of the University of Augsburg investigates both material histories and the intricate relationships that exist between societies and their material and ecological environment. The workshop is informed and yet seeks to move beyond the ‘constructivist-essentialist impasse’ that has long dominated environmental history, for instance. Exemplified in the writings of Donald Worster and William Cronon, this impasse stands as the oscillation between an almost normative understanding of the existence of “pristine” nature—wilderness that needed protection from human destruction—before it shifted (almost entirely) to seeing nature as entirely

¹ Rose, D. B., T. van Dooren, M. Chrulow, S. Cooke, M. Kearnes, E. O’Gorman. “Thinking through the environment, unsettling the humanities,” *Environmental Humanities* 1 (2012): 1–5.

² Neimanis, A., C. Åsberg, J. Hedrén, “Four problems, four directions for environmental humanities: Toward critical posthumanities for the Anthropocene,” *Ethics and the Environment* 20,1 (2015): 67–97.

³ Matthias Schmidt, Jens Soentgen, Hubert Zapf, „Environmental humanities: an emerging field of transdisciplinary research,” *GALA* 29,4 (2020): 225 – 229.

constructed.⁴ Notions of materiality (or ecology) have returned via STS and particularly the writings of Bruno Latour who emphasized the importance of materiality and modes of existence, precisely at a time when the emerging internet seemed to make them obsolete.⁵ Timothy LeCain developed these approaches further arguing for a neo-materialist history that acknowledges things as actors without falling into the trap of a material determinism.⁶ Inspired by New Materialism, this workshop seeks contributions curious to explore a theoretical position that deems these two polarized positions of a postmodern constructivism and positivist scientific materialism as untenable. Instead, it endeavors “co-constitutive ‘intra-actions’ between meaning and matter, which leave neither materiality nor ideality intact” extrapolating how this plays out both in history, social and cultural studies.⁷

Some possible themes to be explored during the workshop “matter and meaning” are:

- (1) Conceptual and theoretical explorations of the ‘intra-actions’ between matter and meaning, the use of archives, and the challenges of the Anthropocene
- (2) Socio-historical biographies of substances and materials, e.g. Salpeter, coal, coffee, carbon dioxide, or DDT
- (3) Processes and practices of ‘nature-making’, both culturally and historically.

Please respond with an abstract of 500-750 words by **May 31, 2024** and send materials to Annette Bayer <sekretariat.umweltgeschichte@philhist.uni-augsburg.de>

⁴ Key figures in this debate are Donald Worster and William Cronon. See Worster, Donald Worster, „Transformations of the Earth. Toward an Agroecological Perspective in History,” *The Journal of American History* 76,4 (1990): 1087-1106; Cronon, „The Trouble with Wilderness; or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995, 69-90.

⁵ Bruno Latour "Can we Get our Materialism Back, Please?", *Isis* 98, 1 (2007): 138-142.

⁶ Timothy LeCain, *The Matter of History: How Things Create the Past*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

⁷ Yi Sencindiver, Susan "New Materialism". In *obo* in Literary and Critical Theory, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0016.xml> (accessed 7 Apr. 2024).