

Matter and Meaning: New Material Ecologies in Culture and History

September 30–October 1, 2024

Environmental Science Center (WZU), Room 201
Prof. Dr. Simone M. Müller, University of Augsburg

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.”ⁱ Scholars in the field understand environmental challenges as “inextricable from social, cultural and human factors.”ⁱⁱ 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 multiple avenues for thinking about human-environment relationships, which cluster around ‘political ecology’, ‘material ecology’, and ‘cultural ecology’.ⁱⁱⁱ

Matter and Meaning, the second workshop in a series of three, 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 radically constructed.^{iv} 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.^v 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.^{vi} 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.^{vii}

September 30, 2024

Arrival | Ankunft ~ 15:00

15:20 Welcome | Willkommen

15:30-16:30 How’s your Elevator Pitch? | Treffen sich Drei

16:30 – 18:00 Thinking with Matter | Stoffgeschichten (Moderation Matthias Schmidt)

Jens Soentgen (University of Augsburg) “Stoffgeschichten“

Evi Zemanek (University of Tübingen) „Ein fossiler Brennstoff als Wissensquelle und Archiv der Naturgeschichte: Zur materiellen Ästhetik und anderen Bedeutung von Kohle“

Lucie Leutenecker (University of Tübingen) „Vom Erzählen lebendiger Böden im Anthropozän. Bodenkundliche Explorationen in den (Medien)Kulturwissenschaften.“

19:00 Joint Dinner

October 1, 2024

8:30 Introduction | Einführung

Simone M. Müller (Universität Augsburg) “Where do we stand? New material ecologies in culture and history”

9:00 – 10:00 Narrating Sustainability | Nachhaltigkeitsgeschichte (Moderation Benjamin Thober)

Christopher Schliephake (Universität Augsburg), “Nachhaltigkeitsforschung in historischer Perspektive: Rezeptionslinien und Diskurse/Praktiken aus der Antike“

Florian Skelton, “A Neo-Materialist History of the “Carbon Budget”

10:15-10:45 Coffee Break | Kaffeepause

10:45 – 12:00 On Singular Matters? | Einzigartige Materialität? (Moderation Laura Bondl)

Kirsten Twelbeck (University of Augsburg) „Wheat Matters“

Julia Ditter (University of Konstanz) “Coal”

Lisa Kolb (University of Augsburg) “Salpeter. A Global Environmental Commodity History”

LUNCH | MITTAGESSEN

13:15-14:15 Rundgespräch “Matter, Meaning, and the Quest for Common Ground” (Moderation Hubert Zapf)

Sven Reichardt, Kerstin Schlögl-Flierl, Katja Sarkowsky, Corey Ross

14:15-15:30 Speaking about Essentials | Wesen-tliches

Ulrich Niggemann (University of Augsburg), “The German Peasants' War from an Environmental History Perspective”

Jana Osterkamp (University of Augsburg), “Healing with wetlands. Bohemia’s moors and the rise of *Naturheilkunde*”

L. Sasha Gora (University of Augsburg), “Heads and Tails and Roe: Storying Fish in the Environmental Humanities”

15:30-16:00 Coffee Break | Kaffeepause

16:00 – 17:00 Multispecies Matters | (Moderation Linda Hess)

Marie A. Muschalek (Basel University) “The Stuff of Natural History: Animal Specimen Collecting and Taxidermy in the Age of Empire”

Tomás Bartoletti (ETH Zürich) “Biological Control and Natural Enemies in the Long Twentieth Century: Towards Multispecies Mattering”

17:00-17:30 Wrap-up | Abschlussgedanken: Matthias Schmidt & Daniel Rothenburg

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

ⁱⁱ 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.

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

^{iv} 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.

^v Bruno Latour “Can we Get our Materialism Back, Please?,” *Isis* 98, 1 (2007): 138–142.

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

^{vii} 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).