

TOXIC!

Toxicity In-Between the Humanities and Natural Sciences

Symposium at the JMU Würzburg

18.11.2022

organized by Anna Frieda Kuhn and Adrian Döring

English Literature and British Cultural Studies

CONVENORS

ANNA FRIEDA KUHN is a PhD candidate and research affiliate at the University of Würzburg's chair of English Literature and British Cultural Studies. Apart from the studies she undertook at JMU Würzburg (BA and MA), she also attended Cambridge University (2016/17) and completed short-term research stays at Jawaharlal-Nehru-University, Delhi (2019) and the University of Cape Town (2021). Her PhD project, entitled 'Articulating Classicism: Attic Tragedy and the Fiction of Globalisation', discusses the way contemporary authors re-work and 'novelise' the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. By theorising the reception of these texts, she attempts to unravel the mechanisms of tragedy in a globalised world.

ADRIAN DÖRING has recently completed his M.A. in Contemporary Literature at the University of Würzburg. When he is not teaching at the University of Würzburg or busy reading up on the latest in low culture, he is charting the clandestine places of the internet in his dissertation 'Bleak Metal. Cultures of Discontent in Virtualized Spaces'. His research interests are spaces, practices, semiotics, and politics at the intersection between cultural and literary studies. He has published on non-human articulation in Field-Recording- and Ambient-music.

SCHEDULE

11:30 - 12:00

Welcome Address and Introduction

12:00 - 13:00

Chair: **Sophie Schönfeld**

Owen Gurrey: Blues for Badger: Infection and Resurrection

Nataliia Labzeva: Human-Machine Communicative Toxicity

13:00 - 14:00

Lunch Break

14:00 - 15:00

Chair: **Sarah Steinke**

Daniel Vedder: Nitrogen in Agriculture: Too Much of a Good Thing...

Ysabel Munoz: Gardening in Polluted Tropics: Materiality and

Toxicity in Olive Senior's Caribbean Poetry

15:00 - 15:30

Coffee Break

15:30 - 16:30

Chair: **Nina Wintermeyer**

Julia Libor: 'Plastic Beach Boys': On Narratives of Pollution in Music
as Responses to Environmental Movements

Christian Schnurr and Laura Fumagalli: Toxic Atmospheres: A
Phenomenology of Silence

16:30 - 17:00

Concluding Discussion

APOKALYPTISCHE HEITERKEIT IN KONVERSATION MIT MAX OSSWALD

Im Mai 2022 hat Autor & Comedian Max Osswald sein Romandebüt "Von hier betrachtet sieht das scheiße aus" bei dtv veröffentlicht.

Im Rahmen des Symposiums "Toxic!" kommt der wortgewandte Münchner nach Würzburg, um mit uns über Rausch, Romane und Hoffnung zu sprechen.

18.11.2022

20 Uhr • Buchhandlung Neuer Weg

Die Buchhandlung findet ihr in der Sanderstraße 23-25 in Würzburg
Veranstaltet vom Lehrstuhl für Englische Kultur- und Literaturwissenschaft
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ZOOM ETIQUETTE

Questions & Contributions

- Please keep your microphone muted during the presentations and note down any questions and ideas which come up in the meantime. In the subsequent discussion, we will take these up.
- Only use the public chat function in Zoom to announce a contribution, question or intervention.
- Feel free to use the private chat function for networking and chats at all times.

Technological Concerns

- If you drop out of the Zoom-room, simply join the meeting again and wait for the host to add you.
- <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us> provides support on most questions that are technology-related. If there are technical issues you cannot solve on your own, please email toxic.symposium@gmail.com
- If there are immediate concerns that cannot wait, send a private message to Adrian Döring.

Click here to join the meeting

Meeting ID: 660 7504 2202

Password: ac!d

Blues for Badger: Infection and Resurrection

In contemporary poet John Burnside's poem 'Uley Blue', the speaker confronts a dead badger in the road, seemingly struck by a car. Using colour as a formal strategy and linking the vicarious ways death enters our sphere of understanding, Burnside's poem shows how the badger's fate has become an index to our ongoing mistreatment of animals and our relationship with the countryside. As the poem develops, it tracks the death of the badger through a litany of enmities towards this ancient woodland creature.

Since the discovery of badgers as vectors for Bovine TB (bTB) in the 1970s, badgers have come to represent a battleground in the modern environmental movement. Burnside shows that their fates are tinged with the industrial slaughter of cattle, and that in shifting away from the human as the contextual centre of the world—as in the poem the lyric 'I' is dissolved in the rain—we may come to see the badger in clear black and white terms. I read the poem through contextualising badgers in literature, the origin of blue as a dye for hunting regalia and finally, through Shakespeare's lines from his sonnet 111, that the human may learn to drink 'Potions of eisel 'gainst my strong infection', an infection by which the human is stained by 'what it works in, like the dyer's hand'.

By standing back from our all-too-human world, we may see the badger regenerate and reclaim its place as a totemic creature, the pity of which may prompt us to live more peaceably and sustainably alongside animals in our spiritual manner of dwelling.

OWEN GURREY is a lecturer in English Literature at Burnley College on their university programs. He has recently submitted a Ph.D on the later poetry of John Burnside through the University of Sheffield. He currently teaches modules including Gothic Narratives, Contemporary Poetry, The Literature of Love, Literary Theory, as well as foundation and introductory modules on Form and Genre, Text and Context and Introduction to Contemporary Literature. Owen also works as an independent proofreader, musician and as a voice-over artist. He lives in Manchester.

SPEAKERS

Human-Machine Communicative Toxicity

The global digital world has triggered a mediating role of the English language in Human-Machine communication. This lingua franca transforms from a social and cultural phenomenon into a linguistic and mathematical conglomerate. Contemporary English is a donor of signs and words for programming languages. Indeed, K. Souza claims that it is possible to interpret human cognition and the algorithm of programming languages to create effective Human-Machine communication applications. G. Dreyfus says that if to interpret a human nervous system according to the laws of physics and chemistry, it would be possible to treat this system as a certain physical device.

In Human-Machine communication, the Human becomes both the author and recipient, while the Machine is a mediator and interlink. For example, a programmer, author, or Human creates an application for online shopping, booking, or banking. The Machine or computer receives these codes, creates an application, and plays the role of a mediator. Another Human, the recipient, gets a response, reaction, or needed service. Despite a potent upgrade of traditional communication, individuals experience communicative toxicity or a feeling of alienation, rooted in the Uncanny Valley phenomenon developed by M. Mori. The following dialogue illustrates this:

Machine: Would you like to pick up your order or do you prefer delivery?

Human: Pick up, please.

Machine: Our opening times are Mon - Fri 10 am to 5 pm.

Human: Your opening times are bad. Please deliver it to my home address.

Machine: Sorry I did not get that. Try again.

Anthropomorphised Machines, such as animated social agents or avatars often neglect the role of a mediator and turn into sound interlocutors for Humans, thus degrading the dominance of the latter in the digital realm of communication and intoxicating Human-Human interactions.

NATALIIA LAZEBNA is a habilitated adjunct professor at the TEFL Methodology Department, JMU Würzburg. She defended her habilitation project at Zaporizhzhia National University, Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine in 2021 and obtained the degree of Habilitated Doctor in Philological Sciences in the field of Germanic Languages. She obtained her Ph.D. in 2013 at Donetsk National University, Ukraine. Lazebna is a member of the TESOL International Organization, and participated in the American English E-Teacher Programs. She is also the author of more than 50 academic journal articles and papers, a reviewer of vocabularies and monographs, and acted as the official opponent at eight Ph.D. thesis defenses.

Nitrogen in Agriculture: Too Much of a Good Thing...

Nitrogen is an essential macronutrient and a frequent limiting factor for plant growth. The invention of artificial nitrogen fixation with the Haber-Bosch process paved the way for the vast agricultural yield increases of the Green Revolution. To this day, synthetic fertilisers are critical for global food production. However, the ubiquitous input of anthropogenic nitrogen has had severe environmental consequences. Nitrogen pollution causes eutrophication, thus changing the species composition of terrestrial ecosystems and leading to the collapse of aquatic ecosystems. It also releases greenhouse gases and threatens human health.

Current levels of agricultural nitrogen use transgress multiple planetary boundaries and must urgently be reduced. To this end, we need technological increases in efficiency, more stringent regulation, and a wider application of agroecological techniques. Ultimately, however, we will only achieve sustainable and just resource use by reducing consumption in the Global North, particularly of resource-intensive, high-value products like meat.

Achieving this transition is a societal challenge that will require the expertise of natural and social scientists as much as humanities scholars, engineers, and economists. Nitrogen is a good thing, but as Paracelsus taught, 'the dose makes the poison'. We need to find ways to bring global nitrogen use back under the toxic threshold before we poison ourselves.

DANIEL VEDDER studied biology at the University of Würzburg, with a focus on ecology and bioinformatics. He is now a doctoral researcher at the German Centre for Integrative Biodiversity Research (iDiv) Halle-Jena-Leipzig, where he uses ecological modelling to study the effects of agricultural policy and practice on biodiversity and ecosystem services.

Gardening in Polluted Tropics: Materiality and Toxicity in Olive Senior's Caribbean Poetry

While toxic substances continue increasingly, and unevenly, to infiltrate the world, the new materialist turn invites us to examine the relationalities emerging between pollution and literature. This paper examines how Olive Senior's poetry collection *Gardening in the Tropics* portrays the imposition of waste and toxicity on Caribbean islands and the counter-narratives to toxic politics that emerge from non-hegemonic perspectives.

The paper utilizes methodological contributions from the fields of waste studies, postcolonial and material ecocriticism, and addresses the need for more scholarship centering toxicity in cultural studies, especially through the lens of tropical materialisms. Moreover, the research engages with theorizations surrounding the concept of the Wasteocene as a novel interpretative framework.

The main findings reveal that the poems 'My Father's Blue Plantation', 'The Immovable Tenant' and 'Advice and Devices' identify how extensive pollution is enabled and perpetuated by colonial systems. The poems illustrate the environmental and socio-political tensions prompted by toxicity, its deleterious effects in organisms and landscapes, and embody how guerrilla narratives can confront widespread toxicity.

YSABEL MUNOZ is a PhD candidate in Literature at NTNU (Norway), where she works with the transdisciplinary project *Narrating Sustainability*. She holds a bachelor's degree in Letters from the University of Havana (2017) and is the recipient of a Chevening Scholarship (2020). She completed the MLitt. *Environment, Culture and Communication* at the University of Glasgow (2021) with a dissertation on pollution in Caribbean art and literature. Munoz is an environmental humanities scholar whose research interests include Caribbean culture, material ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and post/decolonial studies. Her writings have appeared in online publications such as *Edge Effects* and *Environmental History Now*.

'Plastic Beach Boys': On Narratives of Pollution in Music as Responses to Environmental Movements

The pollution of the earth often conjures powerful images: Air pollution so heavy it veils mountains or beaches where the often brightly coloured pieces of plastic collide with the soft tone of sand, in this making pollution extremely visible. Visibility is also the main focus of this paper, which aims to answer how we as a society make fights for the environment visible – through movements, political decisions and laws that try to protect what cannot protect itself.

In this paper, I argue that music should not be an underrated tool in its ability to respond to societal matters such as environmental issues. Particularly from the 1960s onwards, a time when music has become more accessible to a wider audience, environmental messages too were eventually heard by more and more people. To connect the dots of environmentalism, visibility and music, the paper dives into the discography of The Beach Boys, investigating their expressions of environmental pollution, toxicity. And, generally, how their music responds to the emerging environmental movements at the time. In doing so, their music is recognised as a voice, and as a tool, for expressing environmental concerns.

The focal point of the discussion is The Beach Boys' 'Don't go near the Water' (1971). Here, with lyrics about the beach and ocean such as 'The poison floating out to sea / Now threatens life on land', the band makes environmental concerns visible through song lyrics. Of course, their being called The Beach Boys also initiates a comprehensive discussion of the beach lifestyle and surf culture in general at the time, as well as the ways they are connected to The Beach Boys' lyrics on environmental matters. As nature cannot speak for itself, particularly not in the Anthropocene, it is up to us humans to speak for it if we want to protect it.

In the 1960s and 1970s, starting with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), environmental movements and their societal impacts increasingly started to be reflected in literature, and thus also found their way into music as the lyrics of The Beach Boys show. The paper, therefore, discusses images of pollution in the wider context of beach culture. Lyrics will, then, provide us with new insightful perspectives on how we narrate and interpret our earth, and on how we narrate the visibility of nature in the Anthropocene.

JULIA LIBOR is an independent scholar from the coastal town of Wilhelmshaven, Germany. She holds a Master of Arts in English Philology from the University of Göttingen, Germany. Her research focuses on ecofeminist matters, space, life writing and music. As an independent scholar, she has published on Ecofeminism and Shakespeare, and has contributed to the field of Ecocriticism by attending various conferences such as EASLCE (2018, 2022) and the Project Network (on progressive rock and ecology) at the University of Oxford in 2022.

Toxic Atmospheres: A Phenomenology of Silence

The invisibility of toxicity is a major topic in interdisciplinary toxicity studies. Several scholars have pointed out that—although toxins in our foods, bodies and environments become more and more ubiquitous—they are in many ways 'hidden' from our perception as sensory beings. Making toxicity visible has been the project of recent interdisciplinary art installations. This paper contributes to the larger research area of 'toxicity and sensual experience' by shifting the focus from the sense of vision to the sense of hearing. However, rather than sound, it focuses on the topic of silence.

Our basic observation is that silence is a key motif in several literary texts about toxicity. This observation will be demonstrated based on several texts of different genres and geo-cultural backgrounds, including Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Svetlana Alexijewitsch's *Voices of Chernobyl*, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Shigemi Ideguchi's *Singvögel und Raben waren auch nicht mehr da*, as well as anthropological reports on the Lake Nyos disaster.

The hypothesis that the perception of silence is in many cases a contributing factor to the sensual experience of a toxic environment will then, in a second step, be conceptualized in the light of philosophical theories of resonance and atmosphere.

Whereas Hartmut Rosa's theory of loss of resonance leads to a deficient view of silent toxic environments as being deprived of sensory experience and relationship, a more active view of silence can be achieved by considering the aesthetic theory of atmospheres by Hermann Schmitz (2019) and Gernot Böhme (2013). A close reading of *Do Androids Dream* shows how the silence of a toxic environment can be perceived as extremely vivid and lively, contributing to the experience of an obtrusive and haunting atmosphere—a toxic atmosphere.

LAURA FUMAGALLI is a doctoral candidate in Philosophy, specialising in Aesthetics. She works on the concept of contemporary landscapes as a theoretical means to understand the aesthetic experience of nature in an age of environmental crises and to defend the autonomy of the aesthetic value of nature. Her work has connections to environmental ethics and the philosophy of art. Before joining the University of Augsburg, she worked as an assistant in a contemporary art gallery in London and a literary museum in Italy. Previously, she completed an M.A. (2020) in Philosophy and Aesthetics and a B.A. (2017) in Philosophy at the Catholic University of Milan, and an M.Sc. in Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh (2018).

CHRISTIAN SCHNURR comes from a background in chemistry (TU Munich, B.Sc. 2013, M.Sc. 2016) and studied environmental studies, literary theory and philosophy at LMU Munich, before joining the University of Augsburg for his PhD thesis on the public perception of chemicals in environmental discourse. He is analysing the cultural representation of 'foreign substances' in contemporary literature and film from an interdisciplinary point of view. In earlier years he has worked in food analytics, marketing research and agricultural politics counselling.

