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Book Review: Catrin Gersdorf and Juliane Braun, eds., *America after Nature: Democracy, Culture, Environment* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2016), 485 pp.



Catrin Gersdorf and Juliane Braun's edited collection *America After Nature: Democracy, Culture, Environment* is a welcome addition to the present conversations within American studies and the environmental humanities. While Anglophone literature still seems to lead discussions within ecocriticism generally, and while the focus of this collection is on contemporary American cultural developments, this wide-ranging anthology contains a number of strong essays by international contributors. The collection is the product of the sixty-first Annual Conference of the German Association for American Studies which took place in Würzburg in 2014. Ambitious, competent, and comprehensive, *America After Nature* will appeal to those working in interdisciplinary American studies in a broad sense, and especially those interested in the places where American culture and issues of the environment meet, overlap, or converge.

In the introduction to the book, Gersdorf and Braun highlight the end of the Cold War as an essential catalyst for ensuing democratic processes, and for opening up discussion of environmental change. Drawing on the transcendental legacy of Emerson and Thoreau, the editors emphasize early American connections to the potentials and power of culture and art to project environmentalist understandings. The key questions the collection is concerned with are the state of American culture now, with the present understanding of environmental crisis, and what happens to American identity when the material reality of the present ecological predicament becomes clear. Gersdorf and Braun discuss the ways in which late twentieth-century culture "de-emphasized the significance of nature . . . as a liberatory instrument," and instead saw nature as a concept to legitimize "the ideologies of racism and sexism" (16). This is a point of contention, and I wonder why the significant environmental contributions of underground agents of cultural resistance such as the Beat Generation are not discussed. While Allen Ginsberg's coining of the term "flower power" may seem a mere historical footnote, it also helped establish the nature-underground resistance of late twentieth-century American culture, a legacy that continues to this day. Moreover, acknowledgement of the many simultaneous and contradictory developments in the context of cultural developments and environmental thinking would have been welcome. In other words, perhaps the development of American cultural and environmental

thinking is not nearly as linear as the introduction to this collection might suggest. Having said that, the structure of the book is logical and the presentation is excellent throughout.

The volume is divided into thematic sections. The introduction provides background and rationale for the publication of the book. This is followed by a section of papers from the conference keynote speakers. The subsequent sections are concerned with the politics of nature, ecology and urban environments, and visualizing nature. The final part discusses lasting questions in the environmental humanities, including the concepts of risk culture, posthumanist considerations, as well as the links between digital cultures and ecological discourse. While each of the sections is distinct in scope and focus, taken together, they provide an effective overview of the state of environmental discourse in contemporary American culture. While there is not enough space to go into every essay included in the collection here, discussion of a few notable papers should help establish the scope and success of the collection.

The section comprising the keynote lectures was for me was the strongest of the collection, and invites the reader to consider intriguing questions about culture and climate change today. Frank Zelko's "Natural Wonders: Ecological Enchantment in a Secular Age" starts by engaging with the idea of enchantment, and more specifically the common notion that the contemporary world is somehow disenchanted. He discusses recent scholarship on re-enchantment and the ways it centers on "the disenchantment narrative as a soul-searching, at times alarmist discourse" (32). He argues that people have a psychological need for enchantment. His essay delves into historical and philosophical discussions, and closes by suggesting that "disenchanted enchantment" may be a helpful way to think about the modern period (56). John Meyer's "Denialism versus the Resonance Dilemma in the US" responds to the crucial question: "What is the key obstacle to action on climate change and promoting sustainability?" (65) Denialism, and more specifically what he calls the "resonance dilemma," is a promising way to think about the reasons the profound questions raised by climate change remain largely unanswered (69). He ends by suggesting that it is necessary to consider not only the logic of denialism but more importantly the resonance dilemma. Julie Sze's "Environmental Justice and Environmental Humanities in the Anthropocene" argues that culture offers an intriguing window into the "lack of understanding for the most oppressed and disenfranchised" (83; her emphasis). Her paper poses intriguing questions about the form and function of art in an age of unprecedented climate change. She argues that one of the most effective means of combating climate change through art is the refusal to be silent (94): if we speak up, and if we speak loudly enough, society will have to respond. Sylvia Mayer's "Risk Narratives: Climate Change, the American Novel, and the World Risk Society" focuses on what she sees as the largely neglected area of risk theory and its implications for the study of fictional texts. She carries out literary

analyses of what she calls “risk narratives,” drawing on Beck’s concept of the “risk society.” Mayer says that risk narratives “make the risk of climate change more tangible” (108), and therefore offer a didactic response to climate change. She further adds that the focus of risk narratives on future settings allows risk narratives to address the sticky representational challenges of climate change by offering alternative futures to our own situation. She ends by suggesting that discourse on risk narratives problematizes the nature/culture divide.

Beyond the keynote papers, *America after Nature* includes a number of other strong papers. Sascha Pöhlmann’s “Walt Whitman’s Politics of Nature and the Poetic Performance of the Future in ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’” endeavors to answer the question: “How does the translation of principles of nature into political and social concepts work (121)?” He suggests that the answer is that Whitman “made utopian political claims based on a consideration of nature” (121). While this general line of argument is not new, Pöhlmann’s reading of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is. He believes Whitman’s “temporal politics” (138) provides a future orientation that allows for writing to dodge the contradictions of “progress and plenitude” and “manifest destiny or imperialism” (139). Therefore Pöhlmann offers a fresh perspective on the ecological potentials of Whitman’s poetry. Frank Mehring’s essay “Visualizing and Sounding the ‘Walden State of Mind.’ The Urban Matrix in Henry David Thoreau’s Environmental Imagination” also warrants special mention. Mehring asks what city dwellers today can learn from *Walden*, linking Thoreau to the writings of John Cage, which venture “into the sounding of nature” (280). Provocatively, he argues that the “Walden state of mind” should be seen as part of a long urban tradition. Heike Schäfer’s “Nature, Media Culture, and the Transcendentalist Quest for the Real” contemplates the idea of the “transcendentalist conception of nature as emblematic text” (312) before discussing the ways in which photography more specifically helped shape the transcendentalist poetics of both Emerson and Whitman. She concludes by suggesting that both writers recognized the unique potentials of photography, and more specifically the “capacity to record optical reality without distortion,” though Emerson later focused his energies on “a philosophy and poetics of process” (328). However, the development of photography “provided both writers with a terminology and material model that allowed them to theorize processes of perception and signification” (328). Schäfer’s argument that transcendentalist conceptions of nature must be viewed in the context of the contemporaneous emergence of new media is both imaginative and illuminating.

While I fully endorse this book, I do have some minor reservations. For one thing, the title of the collection suggests that democracy is a predominant concern. However, apart from the introduction and a handful of the following essays, there is little in the way of a sustained discussion of the interplay between democracy, nature, and environmental justice. Speaking of justice and the unequal distribution of resources: priced at a hefty €66, the volume appears unlikely to find the wide

readership it deserves. At a time of crisis in the humanities, when library budgets are shrinking almost everywhere, shouldn't ecocritics embrace open access models of academic publishing? Despite these concerns, I find *America after Nature* to be a worthy contribution to the contemporary debate surrounding American culture and environmental change.