

Natural-Cultural Memory in the Anthropocene

Tracing – Archiving – Remembering

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Abstract

Memorials for human and nonhuman victims of the climate crisis, funerals for glaciers as rituals of ecological mourning, and literary memoirs that combine personal biographies, family remembrance and planetary history – all those phenomena are mnemonic responses to the immense consequences of climate crisis. They mark the emergence of a specific Anthropocenic culture of remembrance.

Human activities have been irreversibly changing the basic conditions of life on Earth since colonization and industrialization at the latest. The geological concept of the Anthropocene expresses this (Earth-)historical insight and identifies humans as a planetary geophysical force. To understand the crisis-ridden present, it is necessary to reflect on the temporal dimension of geology and the history of modernity as part of a general history of life. Against this background, the Anthropocene has been established as a cultural concept since around 2010. By bringing together human and Earth history, it contributes to a fundamental re-conceptualization of the relations between nature and culture.

This reconceptualization includes an expansion of cultural memory, which reaches out to deep-time entanglements in the more-than-human world. This emerging natural-cultural memory of the Anthropocene is based on natural archives as a first-order storage memory. These are stocks of, for example, climate history in the ice and deep-sea sediments long before science has started to systematically collect weather data (second-order storage memory). They are key to understand environmental long-term effects of human activities. These material records contain information about the history of the planet and constitute an archival basis for narratives of human history in the horizon of geological deep time. At the time, they mark the beginning of a new chapter in the media history of cultural memory.

Addressing these developments, the conference contributes to a growing field of research on memory studies in the Anthropocene and seeks to expand the traditional humanist lens of cultural memory studies. To understand the role of Earth history and natural archives in public communication and political discourses requires a broader conceptualization of cultural memory. Following the work of Aleida Assmann and others, the conference asks how the information, stored in natural archives, enters the functional memory, actively shaping a culture's identity, its stories and ideas of past, present, and the future.

Structure

The conference will be structured along three main sections that explore different aspects of the mnemonic entanglements of nature and culture in the Anthropocene.

- 1) *Tracing*: The first section focuses on the role of material traces, natural archives, and 'elemental media' as the fundament of natural-cultural memory. It discusses the reconstruction of 'traces' as a key activity to situate cultural memory within a more-

than-human mnemonic environment. 'Tracing' allows to bring different fields of natural sciences into a crossdisciplinary dialogue with memory studies.

- 2) *Archiving*: The second section focuses on institutions and practices of archiving information stored in natural structures as well as their representation in different media. This section opens critical and postcolonial perspectives on power structures and epistemological dispositives involved in scientific practices of archiving natural processes, and how they shape our stories of planetary pasts and futures.
- 3) *Remembering*: The third section focuses on media of communication and public forms of Anthropocenic remembrance. We want to discuss the (activist) creation of rituals and memorials for ecological loss, the re-organization of natural history museums, as well the narration of Anthropocene biographies in different media which bring together personal, cultural, and planetary more-than human memories.

Questions

- 1) *Traces, inscriptions, elemental media*:
 - i. How are material traces of planetary pasts conceptualized? How do these concepts articulate different relations between nature and culture? Does the Earth have an independent 'planetary memory'? Or is planetary memory as such the result of scientific constructions and cultural activities? And can it also be a non-scientific memory (e.g. myths or the Aborigines representation of time)?
 - ii. How might these fundamental conceptual decisions shape a theory of natural-cultural memory? Or are they irrelevant?
- 2) *Anthropocenic cultures and media of remembrance*:
 - i. What narratives, practices and aesthetics characterize Anthropocenic cultures of archiving and remembrance?
 - ii. How can we address the different temporalities of deep time and their communication in the fast cycles of news and social media?
 - iii. How do different media (literature, film, images) and practices of remembrance represent not only deep time, but also natural archives?
 - iv. To what degree is the natural-cultural memory of the Anthropocene self-conscious and does it reflect upon its own conditions?
- 3) *Postcolonial perspectives on natural-cultural memory*:
 - i. How is the contemporary construction of Earth history, which serves as an important foundation in the struggle for climate justice, shaped by colonial epistemologies?
 - ii. Whom do contemporary Earth historical narratives address? Who is included and who is excluded by their 'we'? What blind spots and what kinds of misremembering do our accounts of Earth history reveal from postcolonial perspectives?
 - iii. How are 'natural archives' (ice core samples, seed vaults) embedded in colonial and neocolonial discourses?
 - iv. What would it mean to decolonize natural archives and Earth history?

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For more information see:

<https://www.uni-vechta.de/en/natural-cultural-memory-in-the-anthropocene>