

Theme 1 Environmental Futures

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Future imaginaries—utopian and apocalyptic—have been critical to environmental discourse and action across the globe. Art and science, literature and film, history and policy, have all been important tools upon which to build imagined environmental futures. Theme 1 brings together scholars in the humanities and social sciences, filmmakers, and writers to explore the intersections of artistic, humanistic, and scientific representations of environmental and societal change for future generations. In the rapidly expanding field of environmental humanities, we seek to open an international and interdisciplinary conversation on the material impacts of representational forms. How have imagined environmental futures and development scenarios created through art, literature, science and film, shaped the lived realities of people and other species? How have hopes and fears projected by imagined futures arisen through political, cultural, economic, and ecological realities of the past and present? How do we comprehend and portray environmental change that occurs imperceptibly and over eons of time—and that inflicts slow violence upon future generations—when media, corporate, and political cultures thrive on the short-term?

Past and present futures have accompanied and inspired the development of environmental studies. In 1962, Rachel Carson's canonical study on environmental devastation, *Silent Spring*, opened with "A Fable for Tomorrow." *Our Common Future* served as both the subject and title of the 1987 Brundtland Report sponsored by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development. Science fiction author Dirk Fleck's 2008 *Das Tahiti-Projekt* (The Tahiti Project) is considered the first German eco-utopian novel. Royal Dutch Shell creates scenarios to reveal different possible futures for a planet threatened by dwindling oil reserves and rising carbon dioxide levels. The German government's decision in 2011 to abandon nuclear energy was motivated in large part by the perceived need to protect future generations from radioactive harm. While consuming resources of the deep past and present, we are also future eaters.

Faculty associated with the University of Wisconsin's Center for Culture, History, and Environment (CHE) will engage the theme of environmental futures with colleagues working on related topics at the Rachel Carson Center in Munich, the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin, and the Environmental Humanities Laboratory at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm. A core concern of the research group will be the impact of the

Anthropocene as a scientific concept on the force fields of environmental imagining. The Anthropocene Age was coined in 2000 by Paul Crutzen, the Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist who directed the Max Planck Institute for Chemistry in Mainz from 1980-2000. In an effort to capture a new way of looking at both earth's future and its past in an era of accelerating hydrocarbon extraction and consumption, Crutzen's neologism sought to register how, for the first time in planetary history, a species, *homo sapiens*, has impacted earth's life systems with a geomorphic force, a shift that he dates back to James Watt's invention of the steam engine. The Australian environmental historian Libby Robin (a potential participant in our project) has put the matter succinctly: "We have recently entered a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. There is now considerable evidence that humanity has altered the biophysical systems of Earth, not just the carbon cycle . . . but also the nitrogen cycle and ultimately the atmosphere and climate of the whole globe."

Although the Anthropocene is scientific in origin, the concept has material implications for the way scholars in the social sciences and humanities as well as artists envisage environmental futures. How, in turn, are such scholars and artists seeking to humanize the daunting, potentially abstract, planetary scale of anthropogenic climate change? What creative strategies are emerging that can help animate and give local texture to the diverse impacts of such planetary transformation? To this end, Theme 1 will be attentive to the unequal fallout of global environmental change. We will address the way such change impacts diverse communities—both human and ecological—to dramatically different degrees. For instance, the world's coastal poor, many of whom depend for their livelihood on the fish nurseries sustained by now dying coral reefs and felled mangrove forests, are more acutely vulnerable to environmental upheaval than the coastal rich who congregate in cities like Hamburg, Amsterdam, New York, and Shanghai. If some species can migrate to new futures more readily than others, so, too, different human communities have unequal resources for migrating away from environments that have lost the capacity to sustain them.