

The Nuclear Age, Redux: Forms and Modes of Environmental Change in Transnational North American Literature and Culture

The last few years have seen a resurgence of interest in the nuclear – as both material reality and cultural phenomenon. On the one hand, the war in Ukraine has evoked memories of the previous nuclear disasters and stoked fears of a continued Cold War. On the other hand, politicians and economists are debating nuclear technology as a sustainable alternative to carbon-intense and fossil-based forms of energy. At the same time, popular texts such as the Oscar-winning movie *Oppenheimer* (2023) or the miniseries *Chernobyl* (2019) indicate a renewed fascination with both nuclear capabilities and post-apocalyptic scenarios. Have we entered a new nuclear age, or have we never truly been post-nuclear?

In this workshop, we aim to probe representations of the material traces and cultural legacies of the nuclear in transnational North American literature and culture, especially focusing on the 1980s and beyond. The 1980s mark not only the final years of the Cold War but also a heightened public awareness of toxic substances, natural catastrophes, environmental degradation, and the consequent need to engage climate change and related environmental phenomena as global concerns. Focusing on representations and negotiations of the nuclear since the 1980s thus highlights an interconnected cluster of concerns ranging from human and nonhuman survival, environmental transformation, and energy cultures to the changing (post-)Cold War global system.

While the ‘nuclear criticism’ of the 1980s was strongly shaped by poststructuralist concerns and largely lost traction after the end of the Cold War, selected scholarship beginning in the 2000s has increasingly explored the phenomenon from more diverse angles, including the institutional, material, and conceptual intersections of Cold War dynamics, nuclear cultures, and environmental (specifically climate change) concerns both during and beyond the Cold War period (Cordle 2008; Blouin et al. 2013; DeLoughrey 2013, 2019; Cordle 2017; Daw 2018; Masco 2021; Monnet 2022). From a cultural perspective, the nuclear raises questions about its representability, specifically about the modes and forms of representation that can capture the scalar complexities of material omnipresence and imaginations of the nuclear as a phenomenon. This interest in modes and forms of representation corresponds to a more widespread interest within recent scholarship in the Environmental Humanities and Cold War studies in questions of form and modes of representation (Grausam 2011; Hurley 2020; Schwab 2020; Vermeulen 2020) – thereby aligning with a broader shift in critical thinking towards new formalist methods (Levine 2015, 2023).

In this workshop, we are particularly interested in the nuclear as a site that negotiates and brings into conversation environmental and other societal, political, and individual crises in cultural productions, with a focus on more recent cultural and literary texts. We specifically invite papers that bring together phenomena and issues related to the nuclear with questions of poetics broadly construed, such as form, mode, mood, and style, in transnational North American literature and culture.

Contributions may focus on, but are not limited to, the following themes:

- poetics and politics of the nuclear
- diachronic or synchronic perspectives on representations of the nuclear

- transatlantic or transpacific perspectives on representations of the nuclear
- the afterlives of the Cold War
- the nuclear and environmental justice
- narratives of human and ecological extinction
- narratives of nuclear disaster, catastrophe, and apocalypse
- narratives of toxicity, contamination, sacrifice zones; radiation and infection
- risk narratives
- scales of the nuclear
- concepts such as the nuclear sublime (Ferguson 1984) or the nuclear uncanny (Masco 2006)
- Cold War legacies and the omnipresence of the nuclear in everyday culture
- entanglements of the Cold War and the Anthropocene
- the nuclear as an archive of environmental change

The workshop is planned to take place **digitally via Zoom on November 15, 2024**. There is no attendance fee. If you're interested in taking part, please submit **a proposal (c. 300 words) and a short bio** to the organizers **Lena Pfeifer (lena.pfeifer@uni-wuerzburg.de)** and **Annika M. Schadewaldt (annika.schadewaldt@uni-leipzig.de)** by **July 31**. We are pleased to announce that there is strong **interest by a publisher** for a book based on the workshop's papers.

References

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- Daw, Sarah. *Writing Nature in Cold War American Literature*. Edinburgh UP, 2018.
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