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DECONSTRUCTING UTOPIA: NATURE, COLONIALISM AND SATIRE IN CHRISTIAN KRACHT'S *IMPERIUM* (2012)

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*While there is a conspicuous link between utopian conjectures and natural space, the accelerated environmental degradation in the Anthropocene has significantly blunted the utopian appeal of 'untainted' nature. A similar crisis afflicts notions of utopia as 'undiscovered' space following Reinhart Koselleck's 'temporalization' of utopian speculation. These developments complicate or make impossible literary representations of utopia as unknown or unaltered nature. Drawing on Timothy Morton's ideas of 'space' and 'place' as well as on Eva Horn's reflections on an 'aesthetics of the Anthropocene', the paper examines how narratives of nature as utopia are critiqued and satirised in Christian Kracht's *Imperium* (2012). The island landscape of the South Pacific remains outside the protagonist's narrative control, resisting attempts to abstract it by staging a 'revenge of place.' Representations of nature as non-descript, homogeneous and empty (or 'space') are confronted with the uncanny and dangerous aspects of a specific 'place.'*

KEYWORDS: Nature, Utopia, Dystopia, Colonialism, Satire, Anthropocene

Natural space figures prominently in a range of utopian discourses, be it religious accounts of the afterlife (e.g. the Garden of Eden in Abrahamic religions), philosophical critiques of civilisation (e.g. Arcadia, the medieval locus amoenus) or modern-day tourist ads (e.g. the 'pristine myth'¹ of untouched nature). This

¹ Karl S. Zimmerer, 'Cultural ecology (and political ecology) in the environmental borderlands: Exploring the expanded connectivities within geography', *Progress in Human Geography*, 31.2 (2007), p. 232. As Zimmerer explains, the 'pristine myth' of untouched nature is complemented by the idea of 'humanized landscapes', creating a false binary opposition.

conspicuous link between utopian conjectures and the natural environment is part of a tradition to idealise ‘nature’ in Western thought. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s critique of civilisation and conception of a lost *l’état de nature* spurred notions of nature as uncorrupted and separate from human society.² This separation or ‘dualism,’ which also underlies Kant’s conception of nature as object of a human observer (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 1790), is according to Eva Horn connected to the ‘sense of loss’ and ‘alienation’³ haunting representations of nature in modern art. As Horn suggests, aesthetic engagements with nature either try to ‘repair this loss — in the form of nature writing, for example — or to reflect upon it.’⁴ In his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Theodor Adorno warned against the abstraction of nature from historical and social contexts and the concomitant desire to seek solace in nature, as a deceptive refuge from the alienation and disenfranchisement experienced in society: ‘the subject’s powerlessness in a society petrified into a second nature becomes the motor of the flight into a purportedly first nature.’⁵ Yet, despite his scepticism towards ‘false comforts,’⁶ Adorno still acknowledged a utopian quality in the experience of natural beauty,⁷ as Harriet Johnson⁸ and Jordon Daniels⁹ argue. According to Adorno, the experience of natural beauty ‘recollects a world without domination, one that probably never existed.’¹⁰

This speculative quality is characteristic of utopian conjectures.¹¹ As Vivien Greene notes, utopia is not only ‘a malleable and elastic concept’¹² (what makes a place or society ‘ideal’ has always been a point of contention), but also centred on ‘a tenuous paradigm’¹³ — the no-place. Utopias are set in fantasy worlds or counterfactual pasts and futures. They necessarily rely on some form of — temporal or spatial — displacement. Early utopias¹⁴ in particular are located in spatial

² Laurence D. Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 2006); John Sallis, *The Return of Nature: On the Beyond of Sense* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016).

³ Eva Horn, ‘Challenges for an Aesthetics of the Anthropocene’, in *The Anthropocenic Turn*, ed. by Gabriele Dürbeck and Philip Hüpkes (New York: Routledge 2020), pp. 159–72 (p. 163).

⁴ Horn, ‘Challenges for an Aesthetics of the Anthropocene’, p. 163.

⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Continuum 2002), p. 65.

⁶ Harriet Johnson, ‘Undignified Thoughts After Nature: Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory’, *Critical Horizons*, 12.3 (2011), 372–95 (p. 374).

⁷ Jordan Daniels, ‘Adorno, Benjamin, and Natural Beauty on “This Sad Earth”’, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 34.2 (2020), 159–78 (p. 171). Daniels emphasises that Adorno does not attribute utopian qualities to nature, i.e. natural landscapes: ‘Adorno refuses the idea that nature itself offers an escape from domination; pure nature is pure subjection to force.’

⁸ Johnson, ‘Undignified Thoughts after Nature’, p. 374.

⁹ Daniels, ‘Adorno, Benjamin, and Natural Beauty on “This Sad Earth”’, p. 171.

¹⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 66.

¹¹ Roland Innerhofer, ‘Utopie’, in *Metzler Lexikon Literatur. Begriffe und Definitionen*, ed. by Dieter Burdorf, Christoph Fasbender and Burkhard Moennighoff (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2007), pp. 795–96 (p. 795).

¹² Vivien Greene, ‘Utopia/Dystopia’, *American Art*, 25.2 (2011), 2–7 (p. 2).

¹³ Greene, ‘Utopia/Dystopia’.

¹⁴ Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2022), p. 86.

remoteness, reinforcing the link between nature and utopian speculation. In Thomas More's *Of a republic's best state and of the new island Utopia* (1516), the ideal society, based on religious tolerance and the abolition of private property, thrives on a faraway island. Unsurprisingly, critics like Dietrich Grohnert¹⁵ have identified links between utopian literature and Robinsonades. Spatial remoteness holds the promise of untrodden wilderness but also potential development, a theme which has been explored in literary Robinsonades since Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Defoe's novel merged the fantasy of unspoilt nature with colonial aspirations¹⁶ and political speculation. Despite Crusoe's efforts to replicate certain aspects of the life he left behind, e.g. by first building a table and chair, his island colony also offers a critique of contemporary English society. Unlike England, Crusoe's 'exemplary'¹⁷ island grants its inhabitants freedom of religion. As a testament to the utopian element of Defoe's novel, Rousseau considered the text an exemplification of his state of nature.¹⁸

Yet with a changing climate and accelerated environmental degradation in the Anthropocene, the utopian appeal of 'untainted' nature is significantly blunted. As Timothy Morton argues, 'Nature' (capitalised 'to make it look less natural')¹⁹ has been constructed through processes of 'exclusion,' which he associates with other forms of exclusion like heterosexism or racism. As a consequence, it is traditionally conceived of as 'outside,'²⁰ 'a metaphysical, closed system.'²¹ However, the fantasy of Nature as 'pristine, wild, immediate, and pure'²² can be challenged through an exploration of the ambiguous and manifold entanglements between human and non-human life. Morton conceptualises these interconnections as an open, boundary-defying 'mesh'²³ between 'permeable'²⁴ entities at every level of the earth system: 'between species, between the living and the non-living, between organism and environment.'²⁵

A similar crisis afflicts notions of utopia as 'undiscovered' space following Reinhart Koselleck's 'temporalization' of utopian speculation. Koselleck described a

¹⁵ Dietrich Grohnert, *Aufbau und Selbsterstörung einer literarischen Utopie. Untersuchungen zu Johann Gottfried Schnabels Roman Die Insel Felsenburg* (Sankt Ingbert: Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 1997).

¹⁶ Michael Shinagel, *Daniel Defoe and Middle-Class Gentility* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 132–33; Hans-Jörg Tidick, *Daniel Defoes kleinbürgerliche Gesellschafts- und Literaturkritik. Vorstudien zu einer Analyse des Robinson Crusoe* (Frankfurt: Lang 1983), pp. 113–15. As shown by Shinagel and Tidick among others, Defoe promoted England's colonial expansion in his political and economic writings as well as in his novels. In his 'Plan of the English Commerce — A Complete Prospect of the Trade of this Nation, as well Home as Foreign' (1728), he called for an intensification of colonialisation in view of the stagnating English economy, particularly in Central and South America and the Caribbean islands.

¹⁷ Susanne Schuster, *Narrative Politik. Untersuchungen zur politischen Lektüre von Daniel Defoes Robinson Crusoe Trilogie* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2000), p. 160.

¹⁸ Schuster, *Narrative Politik*, p. 26–27.

¹⁹ Timothy Morton, 'Guest Column: Queer Ecology', *PMLA*, 125.2 (2010), 273–82 (p. 273).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 274.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 275–76.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 275–76.

shift away from spatial conceptions of utopia (the faraway ‘nowheres’²⁶ in More’s *Utopia* or Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*) to future counterworlds, or ‘uchronias,’²⁷ at the onset of modernity. As reason for this shift, Koselleck identifies increased exploration and the accelerated production of ‘knowledge’ about previously unknown areas of the world: ‘The finiteness of the surface of the earth left hardly a strip of coast between land and sea unexplored. [...] If utopia was no longer to be discovered or established on our present-day earth nor in the divine world beyond, it had to be shifted into the future.’²⁸

These developments hamper or make impossible literary representations of utopia as unknown or unaltered natural space. They even complicate attempts to frame nature as utopian setting altogether. Roman Ehrlich’s novel *Malé* (2020), for example, documents the social and ecological collapse of an island community in the near future, blurring the boundaries between utopia and dystopia. Due to rising sea levels, the flooded Maldives have slipped into chaos, with the population either dead or fleeing and criminal militias in charge of the islands. Ironically, drifters, artists and ‘Verfallsromantiker’²⁹ flock to the sinking islands, in search of adventure, missing relatives, or meaning. Through its island setting, the text offers intertextual links to More’s *Utopia*, which are further emphasised by the utopian scheme of one of the inhabitants to create new islands from waste. Human activity is shown to have irrevocably altered natural space, in ways which are both self-destructive (rising sea levels) and potentially creative (waste islands). Instead of reinforcing the fantasy of ‘Nature’ to fuel utopian conjectures, the novel presents a quintessentially anthropocenic landscape.

This convergence of dystopian and utopian elements can also be found in Marlen Haushofer’s postapocalyptic novel *Die Wand* (1963),³⁰ an early ecofeminist³¹ Robinsonade. The protagonist and narrator finds herself trapped behind an invisible wall somewhere in the Austrian Alps, having survived an inexplicable apocalyptic event that potentially eradicated all humans and animals. Haushofer’s novel rejects the colonialist theme of cultivation and development, while salvaging the utopian connotations of extreme isolation in remote spaces. As the narrator’s rations dwindle and vital resources, like her supply of matches, prove themselves to be finite and non-regenerative (in contrast to the optimistic narrative of inventiveness and productivity of many traditional Robinsonades), she establishes a form of ‘ideal community’ with the animals she cares for, pursuing a relationship with the natural world which is not based on domination and exploitation, but

²⁶ Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*, p. 86.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁹ Xaver von Cranach, ‘Malé. Die Untergeher’, *Zeit*, 12 November 2020, <<https://www.zeit.de/2020/47/male-roman-roman-ehrich-malediven-sinnsuche>> [accessed 15 July 2022].

³⁰ Marlen Haushofer, *Die Wand* (Berlin: List, 2020).

³¹ Anna Richards, “‘The Friendship of Our Distant Relations’: Feminism and Animal Families in Marlen Haushofer’s *Die Wand* (1963)”, *Feminist German Studies*, 36.2 (2020), 75–100. According to Anna Richards, ‘Haushofer anticipates feminist, ecofeminist, and pro-animal writings of the 1970s and beyond, particularly the idea of a feminist ethics of care, with her critique of patriarchy and its oppression of women, her sympathy for and reevaluation of the status of non-human animals, and her linking of these two areas of concern.’ (p. 76).

mutuality and care.³² In this way, Haushofer's novel sets itself apart from traditional definitions of utopias, which are centred on the ideal (social, economic, political) state of human society,³³ by widening the scope of the community at the heart of the narrative to include animals. The narrator's radical restart of human-animal relations in a post-apocalyptic world can be read as a rebuke of the exploitation and abuse of non-human life in the Anthropocene.³⁴ Yet despite the reformist vision of the narrative and metaphorical associations of the alpine forest with paradise,³⁵ the narrator remains sceptical of utopias. What she objects to is the element of displacement inherent in utopian narratives, arguing that it inevitably leads to an alienation from nature: 'Ich glaube, es hat nie ein Paradies gegeben. Ein Paradies könnte nur außerhalb der Natur liegen, und ein derartiges Paradies kann ich mir nicht vorstellen. Der Gedanke daran langweilt mich, und ich habe kein Verlangen danach.'³⁶

Christian Kracht's satirical novel *Imperium* (2012) — the focus of this paper — goes even further in its critique of nature as utopia. The text shifts utopian conjectures to the intradiegetic level, as the quasi-colonial scheme of its eccentric protagonist, August Engelhardt. A sun worshipper, vegetarian and nudist, Engelhardt sets out to establish a utopian society founded on a diet of coconuts on the island of Kabakon in colonial German New Guinea.³⁷ Drawing on Timothy Morton's ideas of 'space' and 'place'³⁸ and Eva Horn's reflections on an 'aesthetics of the Anthropocene,'³⁹ the paper explores how narratives of nature as utopia are critiqued and satirised in Kracht's novel. More specifically, it examines how the island landscape of the South Pacific remains outside the protagonist's narrative control, resisting attempts to abstract it by staging a 'revenge of place.' Representations of nature as non-descript, homogeneous and empty (or 'space') are confronted with the uncanny and dangerous aspects of a specific 'place.'⁴⁰

From the beginning of Kracht's *Imperium*, the South Seas are introduced as the setting of colonial fantasies and childhood daydreams. The novel opens with Engelhardt's passage to Herbertshöhe, the capital of German New Guinea, where the

³² Heike Scharm, 'The Return to Earth in the Anthropocene: (E)colonization in Marlen Haushofer and Jesús Carrasco', *Letras Hispanas*, 13 (2017), 255–68. Heike Scharm's ecocritical reading of Haushofer's novel explores the utopian connotations of the protagonist's life behind the wall in detail.

³³ Ulrich Arnswald, 'Zum Utopie-Begriff in der politischen Philosophie', in *Thomas Morus' Utopia und das Genre der Utopie in der Politischen Philosophie*, ed. by Ulrich Arnswald and Hans-Peter Schütt (Karlsruhe: KIT Scientific Publishing, 2020), p. 7.

³⁴ Norbert Elias, 'Thomas Morus' Staatskritik. Mit Überlegungen zur Bestimmung des Begriffs Utopie', in *Utopieforschung. Interdisziplinäre Studien zur neuzeitlichen Utopie*, ed. by Wilhelm Vosskamp (Stuttgart: Enke, 1982), p. 103. According to Norbert Elias, utopian narratives unfold their speculative potential by proposing solutions to unsolved problems, indicative of desirable (or undesirable) social changes in the real world.

³⁵ Haushofer, *Die Wand*, p. 77.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³⁷ Thomas Schwarz, 'Im Denotationsverbot? Christian Krachts Roman "Imperium" als Reise ans Ende der Ironie', *Zeitschrift Für Germanistik*, 24.1 (2014), 123–42. The novel is based on real events. Thomas Schwarz gives a detailed account of the historical Engelhardt and his plantation scheme.

³⁸ Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 11.

³⁹ Horn, 'Challenges for an Aesthetics of the Anthropocene', p. 163.

⁴⁰ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 11.

young man first encounters European planters. Engelhardt's observations of his fellow passengers reveal a deep contempt for their lethargic and callous way of life and contradict the colonial rhetoric of progress and racial superiority. The planters are drowsy, unkempt and disease-ridden, wasting away as a consequence of their own self-indulgent lifestyle:

Engelhardt [...] hatte [...] nur [Augen] für die dickleibigen Pflanzer, die — lange schon unbehandelte, tertiäre Syphilis in sich tragend — jetzt zurückkehrten auf ihre Plantagen und über den trocken und ermüdend geschriebenen Artikeln in *Der Tropenpflanzer* oder der *Deutschen Kolonialzeitung* eingeschlafen waren [...].⁴¹

To the newcomer, the colonial community seems backwards and parochial, reading old newspapers ('[die] nicht mehr allerneusten Zeitungen aus Berlin,' 32) and following outdated fashion trends: '[D]as waren sie, Verwalter des vermeintlichen Fortschritts, diese Philister mit ihren gestutzten, in der Berliner oder Münchener Mode von vor drei Jahren gehaltenen Schnurrbärten unter rotgeäderten Nasenflügeln [...]' (15). Engelhardt's first impressions of the German colony thus represents an example of 'colonial lag.'⁴² Colonial modernity, according to Jed Esty, is characterised by permanent but uneven growth, with the periphery lagging behind the modernisation of the motherland. This challenges the simplistic idea of modernity as a cumulative process ('Moderne als kumulativer Prozess,' 26), advanced at the beginning of the novel by the ostensibly omniscient,⁴³ but irreverently ironic and ideologically dubious⁴⁴ narrator.

⁴¹ Christian Kracht, *Imperium* (Cologne: Fischer, 2012), p. 15. All following citations from the novel will be given in the text.

⁴² Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth. Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴³ Ralph Pordzik, 'Wenn die Ironie wild wird, oder: Lesen Lernen. Strukturen Parasitärer Ironie in Christian Krachts "Imperium"', *Zeitschrift für Germanistik*, 23.3 (2013), 574–91. Ralph Pordzik attributes the narrator's occasional willful reserve to divulge information to his picaresque nature: '[...] [A]lles unerhörte Maßlosigkeit und Verirrungen, auf die Spitze getrieben im Bild jenes schelmischen auktorialen Erzählers, der noch in der Behauptung seiner Allwissenshaft die Chuzpe besitzt, die für den Leser eigentlich wichtigen Zusammenhänge einer Szene unvermittelt "im Nebel der erzählerischen Unsicherheit" sich verflüchtigen zu lassen.' (p. 589). Pordzik also comments on the confounding complexity of the narrator. They are on the one hand entangled in racist and colonialist discourses but also show an extensive knowledge of later historical events, e.g. the Shoa, as well as a post-modern affinity for self-reflection.

⁴⁴ The overt racism of the omniscient narrator sparked a heated debate in German media after the novel's publication, which Thomas Schwarz (2014) documents in detail. It has also inspired a number of academic engagements with the text's narrative structure, e.g.: Claudia Breger, 'Transnationalism, Colonial Loops, and the Vicissitudes of Cosmopolitan Affect: Christian Kracht's *Imperium* and Teju Cole's *Open City*', in *Transnationalism in Contemporary German-Language Literature*, ed. by Elisabeth Herrmann et al. (Camden: Boydell & Brewer, 2015), pp. 106–24. Claudia Breger is particularly critical of Kracht's narrator figure. She argues that the narrator's racist attitudes are never 'challenge[d]' (p. 111) despite the novel's 'aesthetics of disgust', which highlight Engelhardt's eventual physical and psychological ruin: 'My concern is that these techniques of distancing do not yet get us out of the discursive world of Engelhardt and his German contemporaries.' (p. 112). Robin Hauenstein, 'Ein Schritt zurück in die exquisiteste Barbarei — Mit Deutschland in der Südsee. Christian Krachts metahistoriographischer Abenteuerroman *Imperium*', *Germanica*, 55 (2014), 29–45. In contrast to Breger, Robin Hauenstein interprets

While the planters spend the journey to Herbertshöhe in a lazy stupor, indulging in sexual fantasies about local women, the narrator recounts Engelhardt's childhood daydreams inspired by scientific folios. The South Pacific fauna, most notably the birds of paradise, are embellished by Engelhardt's vivid imagination, foreshadowing his predilection for narrative license:

[F]rüher, als Bub, hatte er [die Paradiesvögel] und ihr herrliches, ausladendes, in der Glutsonne seiner kindlichen Imagination schimmerndes Gefieder stundenlang in den Folianten untersucht, mit den kleinen Fingern über ihr Schnäbel fahrend, über ihre bunten Federn. (14)

Incidentally, one of the planters on the ship, Hartmut Otto, deals with the birds' feathers and gives a detailed account of their brutal harvesting methods, undermining the utopian connotations of Engelhardt's youthful fancies and alluding to the ruthless exploitation at the heart of the colonial economic system: 'Im Idealfall, notabene, würden die Federn dem Tiere bei lebendigem Leibe entrupft [...]. Die Federn müßten vielmehr am unteren Ende ihres Kiels, als Qualitätssiegel sozusagen, Blutspuren aufweisen, sonst kaufe er sie erst gar nicht.' (25).

A similar process of idealisation shapes the political sphere: the islands of German New Guinea, though deemed politically superfluous ('überflüssig,' 19) in comparison to the African colonies, are hyperbolised in the political discourse of the capital: 'Im fernen Berlin [...] sprach man von den Inseln wie von kostbaren, leuchtenden Perlen, zu einer Kette aufgereiht.' (20). Engelhardt's plan to establish a commune in the South Pacific *Schutzgebiete* is itself influenced by these hyperboles and as such far from original. As the narrator points out with obvious irony, Engelhardt merely follows in the footsteps of other dreamers, attracted by the siren's call of paradise ('Sirenenruf des Paradieses,' 22). As in his childhood, Engelhardt's image of the South Pacific and admiration for its natural environment remains shaped by texts. He travels to the colony equipped with prior knowledge, represented by the small library of philosophical and literary reading material he brings with him: 'Thoreau, Tolstoi, Stirner, Lamarck, Hobbes, auch Swedenborg, die Blavatsky und die Theosophen' (35). Although his journey to German New Guinea is an attempt to extricate himself from Western civilisation, Engelhardt's endeavour still implicitly relies on some of its foundational texts. Interestingly, the novel itself is highly intertextual, as Ralph Pordzik⁴⁵ shows. Among those pretexts are Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and E.M. Forster's *Passage to India*. The intertextual quality of the novel thus mirrors and highlights Engelhardt's own indebtedness to texts.

The colony of coconut-eaters ('Kokovoren') on Kabakon has the characteristics of a utopian project but is continuously undermined by satire. The scheme is motivated by Engelhardt's idealistic desire to change the world for the better — evoking the reformist impetus of utopias — and also involves elements of (spatial and temporal) displacement. It is Kabakon's remoteness which draws Engelhardt to the

the narrator's racist and colonialist attitudes as ironic subversion and postcolonial critique: 'Krachts "Methode" ist folglich nicht die Verbreitung rechten Gedankenguts, sondern das ironisch-kritische Zitieren des kolonialen und antisemitischen Diskurses [...]' (p. 33).

⁴⁵ Pordzik, 'Wenn die Ironie wild wird', p. 584.

island, expecting to find the locals more open and accepting — ‘vorurteilsfrei und weltoffen’ (57) — to his ideas because of their physical distance from Western civilisation and what he disdainfully describes as ‘Europavergiftung’ (35). The fruition of his coconut scheme is at first also firmly projected into the future, as the effusive title of his publication ‘Eine sorgenfreie Zukunft’ (21) suggests. When Engelhardt arrives on Kabakon, this expectation of future fulfilment is replaced by giddy disbelief: ‘[S]ein Herz [begann] auf und nieder zu flattern wie ein aufgeregter Sperling. Meine Güte, dachte er, dies war nun wirklich seins! Dies alles!’ (67).

What fuels the project is Engelhardt’s belief in the transformative power of his ‘great idea,’ subtly undermined in the following quote by free indirect speech: ‘Er würde Pflanze werden, doch nicht aus Profitgier, sondern aus zutiefst empfundenem Glauben, er könne Kraft seiner großen Idee die Welt, die ihm feindlich, dumm und grausam dünkte, für immer verändern.’ (21). There are examples of free indirect speech throughout the novel. By merging the voices of narrator and focalizer, the idiosyncrasies of Engelhardt’s way of speaking are retained, but the ironic voice of the narrator remains present as well. The effect is a mocking mimicry of both Engelhardt’s lofty rhetoric and ideological fervour.

Engelhardt’s radical (‘radikale[r] Geist,’ 26) worldview is centred on the coconut and combines an extreme form of vegetarianism with aspects of the Judeo-Christian tradition and religious mysticism: the consumption of coconuts, which Engelhardt describes as *imago dei* and crown of creation (‘Krone der Schöpfung,’ 21), is the ‘true sacrament of nature’ (‘wirklichen Sakrament der Natur,’ 44). It allows the merging with the divine (‘Einswerdung mit dem Göttlichen,’ 42), albeit as an act of theophagy. In this way, the Rousseauian idea of a ‘return to nature,’ evoked at the beginning of the novel by Engelhardt’s flight from Europe to the South Seas, also appears as part of his increasingly inscrutable belief system and is thus subject to the novel’s biting satire.

Beyond highlighting the eccentric and increasingly grotesque aspects of Engelhardt’s project, the text launches a more general critique of nature as utopia. The framing of Kabakon as an ideal place can be read as a narrative appropriation of the natural landscape, which has colonial implications. Engelhardt’s perception of Kabakon is relayed through hyperbolic nature descriptions about quiet, transparent waters and majestically towering palm trees:

Eine eigene Insel zu besitzen, auf der in freier Natur die Kokosnuß wuchs und gedieh! Es war Engelhardt noch gar nicht vollständig ins Bewußtsein vorge drungen, doch jetzt, da das kleine Boot vom offenen Ozean in das stillere, transparente Gewässer einer kleinen Bucht glitt, deren hellgezauberter Strand von majestätisch hochragenden Palmen umsäumt war, begann sein Herz auf und nieder zu flattern [...]. (67)

To describe his new home, he falls back on utopian catchwords from myth and religion, which become devoid of meaning through sheer repetition: Kabakon is likened to ‘terra incognita’ (31), ‘Zion’ (31), ‘Garten Eden’ (35), ‘Yggdrasil’ (21), ‘Paradies’ (125) and ‘Utopia’ (165). These formulaic images of the South Seas are mainly promulgated through Engelhardt’s exuberant letters to Germany, with which he hopes to attract members for his commune. In them, Engelhardt praises the captivating beauty of the colony while leaving the torrent-like daily

rain showers unmentioned. That he conceals the inclement weather conditions on the island is only added as an ironic footnote by the narrator:

Engelhardt [schrieb] rund ein Dutzend Briefe in die Heimat und an seine Verwandten, in denen er in blumigen, überschwenglichen Worten die hinreißende Schönheit der Kolonie anpries [...] (die allnachmittäglichen, sturzbachähnlichen Regenschauer ließ er in diesen Zeilen unerwähnt). (55–57)

Engelhardt's letters are an — inept and futile — attempt to exert narrative control over the island landscape. In his picturesque descriptions, the South Pacific appears as a benign and harmless place that can be easily acquired and owned, emphasising the colonial connotations of his project. Despite his initial disgust for the German planters, Engelhardt's coconut scheme quickly reveals itself as a colonial endeavour. In a parody of a colonialist sense of mission, Engelhardt imagines himself as prophet and missionary of a future 'colony' of coconut-eaters: 'August Engelhardts sehnlichster Wunsch, ja seine Bestimmung war es, eine Kolonie der Kokovoren zu erschaffen, als Prophet sah er sich und als Missionar zugleich.' (22). His long-term plan — after establishing a plantation on Kabakon — is to found coconut colonies around the globe: 'Er kündigt von der Idee, den Erdball mit Kokos-Kolonien zu umringen [...]' (83). According to Robin Hauenstein, the novel also suggests ideological continuities between the German colonial period and the rise of national socialism. Even at the beginning of the novel, the narrator coyly compares Engelhardt to Hitler: '[W]enn dabei manchmal Parallelen zu einem späteren deutschen Romantiker und Vegetarier ins Bewußtsein dringen, der vielleicht lieber bei seiner Staffelei geblieben wäre, so ist dies durchaus beabsichtigt und sinnigerweise, Verzeihung, *in nuce* auch kohärent.' (20–21). These associations are emphasised in later chapters, which trace Engelhardt's mental derangement and growing antisemitism. As Hauenstein asserts: 'Kracht geht es gerade auch darum, die Anfänge der späteren Eskalation zu skizzieren und die Geschichte Engelhardts "stellvertretend" für den Weg Deutschlands nachzuzeichnen [...]'⁴⁶

In Engelhardt's embellished depictions, the South Pacific islands and their natural environment also lose all cultural and geographical specificity. They are turned into a literal 'no-place,' which is reinforced by his indiscriminate evocations of utopian imagery. In *Dark Ecology*, Timothy Morton distinguishes between 'localized' and 'particular' place and 'homogeneous,' 'smooth' and 'empty' space.⁴⁷ The utopian framing of the South Pacific, propagated by colonial propaganda and Engelhardt's letters, can be categorised as space. According to Morton, space is inherently 'anthropocentric'⁴⁸ and implicated in Western 'imperialist'⁴⁹ thought. In regard to place, Morton argues that '[w]e are either the kind of person who thinks that the category of place is a quaint antique or we are the kind of person who thinks that the category is worth preserving because it is antique.'⁵⁰ In contrast

⁴⁶ Hauenstein, 'Ein Schritt zurück in die exquisiteste Barbarei', p. 34.

⁴⁷ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 9–10.

⁴⁸ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 10.

⁵⁰ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 9.

to these nostalgic and romanticised conceptions of place, equivalent to ‘villages, the organic, slow time, traditions,’⁵¹ Morton’s idea of place is more unsettling: ‘place has emerged in its truly monstrous uncanny dimension, which is to say its non-human dimension.’⁵² The only geographic or cultural descriptor Engelhardt attaches to the island landscape is ‘German,’ e.g. when he contemplates the consequences of a war in Europe for the balance of power in the South Pacific:

Würde das Meer ein angelsächsischer *Pacific* werden, würde man ihn dann gewähren lassen, auf seinem Kabakon? Wohl kaum. Würde das kleine Eiland nicht vielmehr auch annektiert werden und seine Arbeiter fortan für den englischen König an seinen Kokospalmen Frondienste leisten müssen? Vorbei wäre es dann mit dem deutschen, dem freien Paradiese. (105–06)

According to Hauenstein, the myth of the ‘idyllische deutsche Südsee’⁵³ was promulgated in the colonial discourse of the German Empire and can be considered one of the non-literary pre-texts of Kracht’s novel.

The self-involved, closed-off quality of Engelhardt’s narrative of Kabakon, which is blind to the particularities — and dangers — of the cultural landscape around him, is reflected in his increasing social isolation on the island and, in later chapters, metaphorically represented by his auto-anthropophagic tendencies⁵⁴ (he starts to consume his toenails and fingers). Although he longs for a fellow utopian (‘einen Freund, einen Mitutopisten,’ 147), Engelhardt lives alone for most of his time on the island, which upends traditional notions of utopia as an ideal community. He is only accompanied by Makali, an indigenous youth who brings to mind *Robinson Crusoe*’s Friday, but is in fact much more independent. It is Makali who chooses the best place to build Engelhardt’s hut, subverting the latter’s ostensibly absolute rule over the island. Similar to Crusoe, Engelhardt also starts to teach Makali. Their choice of reading material — e.g. Dicken’s *Great Expectations*, a classic bildungsroman — is particularly striking. By alluding to the practice of colonial education, the colonial implications of the plantation project are once again accentuated. Engelhardt’s acquaintance with Heinrich Aueckens, a fellow vegetarian from Helgoland, promises companionship (based on a shared interest in the Transcendentalist movement and Tennyson’s utopian poem *The Lotos-Eaters*) but ends abruptly when Aueckens sexually assaults Makali and dies under mysterious circumstances. From then on, Engelhardt’s increasing isolation on the island, along with his extremely restricted diet, accelerates his physical and psychological decline.

Similar issues of isolation and narrative unreliability are negotiated in Haushofer’s novel *Die Wand*, in which the narrator’s relationship with the animals in her care ultimately relies on her own interpretations of their emotions and wellbeing.

⁵¹ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 9.

⁵² Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 10.

⁵³ Hauenstein, ‘Ein Schritt zurück in die exquisiteste Barbarei’, p. 21.

⁵⁴ Hauenstein, ‘Ein Schritt zurück in die exquisiteste Barbarei’, p. 39. Hauenstein also addresses the significance of cannibalism in the contemporary colonial discourse and explains how the motif is subverted to underpin the novel’s postcolonial critique: ‘Für den kolonialen Diskurs, dem sich Kracht ironisch annimmt, bedeutet die Wandlung Engelhardts zum Kannibalen und damit nach dieser Logik größtmöglichen Primitivität bei zeitgleicher “Fortentwicklung” der Insulaner die vollständige Demontage.’

The inescapable solipsism of her existence behind the wall is highlighted when she studies her own reflection in her cat's eyes: 'Ich sehe mein Gesicht, klein und verzerrt, im Spiegel ihrer großen Augen. Sie hat sich angewöhnt zu antworten, wenn ich zu ihr spreche. [...] Hrrr, grrr, mau, sagt sie, und das mag heißen, man wird ja sehen, Menschenfrau, ich möchte mich nicht festlegen.'⁵⁵ The only way out of her privileged but self-involved role of interpreting and recording the natural world around her, is to abandon her narration altogether, which the protagonist alludes to at the very end of the novel.⁵⁶

In contrast to Haushofer's novel, challenges to Engelhardt's narrative of Kabakon are much more overt. In fact, his narrative authority is undermined by a number of narrative strategies, which also open up ecocritical perspectives on the text. One of these strategies is the inclusion of multiple points of view in the narration, which Benjamin Bühler identifies as one of the characteristics of nature-oriented⁵⁷ literature. Engelhardt's utopian vision is limited by these additional narrative perspectives, which supply alternative viewpoints or missing information. This 'Splitterung der Realität' (68) — i.e. fracturing of reality — is explicitly referred to during Engelhardt's arrival on Kabakon:

[F]ür die schwarzen Männer im Boot und die paar Eingeborenen [...] sah es aus, als sei es ein frommer Gottesmann, der dort vor ihnen betete, während es uns Zivilisierte vielleicht an eine Darstellung der Landung des Konquistadoren Hernán Cortés am jungfräulichen Strande von San Juan de Ulúan erinnert [...]. So sah die Besitznahme der Insel Kabakon durch unseren Freund ganz unterschiedlich aus, je nachdem von welcher Warte aus man das Szenario betrachtete und wer man tatsächlich war. (68)

Through the juxtaposition of multiple viewpoints, the reader learns that the indigenous population of Kabakon is not aware that their home is now officially owned by someone else: 'Nun kommt man nicht umhin zu sagen, daß die Bewohner von Kabakon gar nichts von dem Umstand wußten, daß die kleine Insel, auf der sie seit Menschengedenken lebten, auf einmal nicht mehr ihnen gehörte, sondern dem jungen *waitman* [...]' (72). They are merely tolerating Engelhardt's rule over the island, confident in their own superiority, which turns colonial stereotypes on its head. Outside perspectives also challenge Engelhardt's inflated self-image. Emma Forsayth, the previous owner of Kabakon, describes him curtly as odd and thin as a sparrow, with an impossible haircut ('Sonderling [...] mit dieser unmöglichen Frisur [...], mager wie ein Spatz,' 63). She presents a sober counter-narrative of Engelhardt's coconut endeavour. Kabakon is small and expensive, and Engelhardt is too easily tricked into buying it: '[Wenn] Engelhardt [...] sein Geld bei ihr lassen wolle, dann bitte sehr.' (63).

⁵⁵ Haushofer, *Die Wand*, p. 52.

⁵⁶ Scharm, 'The Return to Earth in the Anthropocene', p. 261. Scharm argues similarly that 'the writing process emphasizes the binary opposition between nature and culture. In the end, Haushofer's protagonist, therefore, must abandon her diary and chooses contemplation within nature and the physical proximity of wildlife over her isolated writing activities.'

⁵⁷ Benjamin Bühler, *Ecocriticism. Grundlagen — Theorien — Interpretationen* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2016), p. 31.

Still, the novel's narrative structure is not fully non-hierarchical. The omniscient narrator remains in charge of the narration throughout the novel, despite using different focalizers to advance the story. The narrator's questionable ideological allegiances, however, make them unreliable,⁵⁸ which significantly levels narrational hierarchies. A self-proclaimed non-Gnostic, the narrator takes up an uncritical view of progress and modernity, and promotes racist ('Halbblut,' 59; 'Wilde,' 70) as well as colonialist images of the South Seas (e.g. as uncivilized): 'Engelhardt [war] gerade auf dem Weg [...], sich nicht nur der allerorten beginnenden Moderne zu entziehen, sondern insgesamt dem, was wir Nichtgnostiker als Fortschritt bezeichnen, als, nun ja, die Zivilisation.' (69).

Another narrative feature which subverts Engelhardt's framing of Kabakon as utopia is foreshadowing. The German planters, which Engelhardt views with such disdain during his journey to German New Guinea, are quick to peg him as 'lebensuntauglich' (16) and give him no more than a year in the South Pacific. Their disparaging judgements are but one example of how the text foreshadows Engelhardt's physical and mental deterioration. Allusions to his eventual fate (anti-semitic, leprous and auto-anthropophagic) create a sense of doom and inevitability that works against the optimistic, forward-looking logic of utopian narratives.

Finally, Engelhardt's utopian vision is undermined by the harsh, hostile and destructive aspects of the South Pacific landscape, which are increasingly highlighted in the narration. In her reflections on an 'Aesthetics of the Anthropocene,'⁵⁹ Eva Horn advocates an aesthetics which is informed by a 'transformed' understanding of nature and humanity. Instead of perceiving nature as the 'other of culture' (based on a human-nature duality) and focussing on loss or alienation, this aesthetics needs to engage with the 'uncanniness of the life-world.'⁶⁰ As Amitav Ghosh argues, '[n]o other word comes close to expressing the strangeness of what is unfolding around us.'⁶¹ Uncanny does not mean 'strange in the sense of being unknown or alien.' Instead, it 'lies precisely in the fact that [...] we recognize something we had turned away from: that is to say, the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors.'⁶² In response to Ghosh, Horn describes the uncanny as an unsettling 're-cognition' of the natural environment, i.e. a becoming aware of nature as 'alive, threatening, unpredictable, sentient and temperamental.'⁶³

While initial descriptions of the South Seas in Kracht's novel are nothing short of idyllic, dangerous and inscrutable aspects of the island landscape soon begin to crop

⁵⁸ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1983), p. 100. Rimmon-Kenan's general definition holds that an unreliable narrator 'is one whose rendering of the story and/or commentary on it the reader has reasons to suspect' — because of 'his problematic value-scheme', 'limited knowledge' or 'personal involvement.'

⁵⁹ Horn, 'Challenges for an Aesthetics of the Anthropocene', p. 164. According to Horn, a new 'aesthetics of the Anthropocene' needs to address three 'fundamental, yet intertwined' aspects of our Anthropocenic present: '(1) latency, the withdrawal from perceptibility and representability; (2) entanglement, a new awareness of coexistence and immanence of the human within the non-human; and (3) scale, the clash of incompatible orders of magnitude.'

⁶⁰ Horn, 'Challenges for an Aesthetics of the Anthropocene', p. 163.

⁶¹ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement. Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 30.

⁶² Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, p. 30.

⁶³ Horn, 'Challenges for an Aesthetics of the Anthropocene', p. 163.

up. A prominent example is the relentlessness of the tropical sun. It is described as glaringly bright ('gleißend,' 30) and terrible ('schrecklich,' 33) in its intensity, to the point of painfulness ('der stechenden Sonne,' 118). This contradicts Engelhardt's cultish admiration for the sun, which plays a central role in his worldview because of its alleged healing properties. Instead of the expected nurturing effects, however, Engelhardt ends up with a severe sunburn: 'Die Sonne stach mit erbarmungsloser Vehemenz vom Himmel, bald waren seine Schultern rotverbrannt.' (70). The sense of threat increases gradually, ominously — during Engelhardt's passage to Herbertshöhe, sunbeams are 'piercing' through clouds in luminous pillars in an otherwise idyllic landscape: 'Engelhart war auf die fast schmerzhafteste Schönheit dieser Südmeere gar nicht vorbereitet gewesen; Sonnenstrahlen stießen in leuchtenden Säulen durch die Wolken, des Abends senkte sich friedliche Milde über die Küsten und ihre hintereinander gestaffelten, sich im zuckrigvioletten Licht der Dämmerung ins Unendliche fortsetzenden Bergketten.' (23). The motif of the sun later reappears in reference to Hitler's rise to power ('Mit dem indischen Sonnenkreuze eindrucklich beflaggt, wird alsdann ein kleiner Vegetarier, eine absurde schwarze Zahnbürste unter der Nase, die drei, vier Stufen zur Bühne ... ach, warten wir doch einfach ab [...].', 82), and finally in Engelhardt's paranoid hallucinations ('Er sah wieder jenes Feuerrad,' 184). The motif thus accompanies his psychological decline, tying it metaphorically to the island landscape. It also implies yet again links between German colonialism (represented by Engelhardt's colonial project) and the Third Reich.

Disconcerting descriptions of the South Pacific are sometimes directly contrasted with Engelhardt's idealised viewpoint, e.g. in the following passage which follows shortly after Engelhardt labels the South Seas 'terra incognita': 'Haushohe Palmen staken aus dem dampfenden Busch Neupommerns. Blauer Rauch stieg von den bewaldeten Hängen auf, hier und da waren Lichtungen und in denselben einzelne Grashütten auszumachen. Ein Makake schrie elendig.' (31). The scale of natural features — like the towering trees — is magnified, creating an ironic contrast with the provincial German name of the island. Scale is repeatedly highlighted in other nature descriptions, helping to create unsettling landscapes: 'Auf den Hügeln jenseits der Stadt ragten Zypressen jäh wie schwarze Flammen in den überblauen Himmel.' (64–65). Interestingly, an extreme increase in scale produces idealised perspectives on the island landscape, e.g. when Engelhardt imagines dolphins diving into the fathomless sea ('Einmal sah Engelhardt in der Ferne ein Rudel Delphine, doch kaum hatte er sich vom Schiffsmeister ein Fernglas geliehen, waren sie schon wieder abgetaucht in die unergründliche See.' 17) or mountain ranges get lost in the distance ('ihre [...] sich im zuckrigvioletten Licht der Dämmerung ins Unendliche fortsetzenden Bergketten,' 23). Similar rhetorical inflations characterise the colonial discourse about the South Seas in the German capital: 'ein derart großes, in der Unendlichkeit des Stillen Ozeans versprenkeltes Reich' (20).

These evocations of the infinite produce abstract spaces, which are increasingly challenged by Engelhardt's experiences with the actual South Pacific landscape. The closer Engelhardt gets to German New Guinea (gradually reducing the element of displacement sustaining his utopian vision), the more he experiences exhaustion and physical discomfort. Upon his arrival in Herbertshöhe, he is overcome by a sudden nosebleed and nervous breakdown. A similar logic of deterioration marks Engelhardt's time on Kabakon. The longer he stays, the more

harmful are the effects of nature on his physical and mental health. The gruelling South Pacific climate is highlighted early on when his hair ties dissolve in the humidity and heat. This theme of corrosion is continued throughout the narrative, e.g. in the incremental spread of latent deceases (Syphilis, Malaria, leprosy). When Engelhardt eventually contracts leprosy, the wounds on his legs are unable to close and heal because of the ‘tropisch bedingte[] Feuchtigkeit’ (179). This serves as a reminder of the permeability of bodies and complex interactions between (non)human life and the environment Morton conceptualised as ‘mesh.’ Even during Engelhardt’s first night on the island, nature gets uncomfortably close: sand ends up in his ear (which eventually suffers from a protracted infection) and a swarm of mosquitoes torment him with ‘Dutzenden, äußerst schmerzhaften Stichen’ (71).

The natural environment performs a slow-moving but ultimately lethal ‘revenge of place,’ as Morton describes the reassertion of localised and particular spatial perspectives, in defiance of meaningless abstractions. In a particularly striking scene, nature temporarily acquires individual agency when a mosquito infects Governor Hall with blackwater fever. The act is metaphorically framed as a sexual assault, alluding to the ‘monstrous uncanny dimension, which is to say [...] nonhuman dimension’⁶⁴ of place Morton references in *Dark Ecology*. However, the minuscule scale of the attacker here precludes or ironises associations of the nonhuman with the monstrous: ‘[D]ie Mücke [hatte] noch im Anflug die Proboscis ausgefahren, um, blind vor Gier, an des Gouverneurs sauber ausrasiertem Nacken anzulanden und ihn mit einem kathartischen, crescendohaften Biß zu penetrieren [...]’ (55). Despite its satirical tone, the episode exposes the disconcerting ‘presence and proximity’⁶⁵ of nonhuman life, entirely ignored in Engelhardt’s utopian narrative, which Ghosh describes as ‘uncanny.’ This proximity (also evident in the dangerous permeability of bodies mentioned above) counteracts attempts to conceive of nature as ‘outside’ or to ‘exclude’ it. As Horn asserts, a conception of nature which highlights its ‘manifold, complex interdependencies, discontinuities and surprises [refuses to be] epistemologically held at a distance,’⁶⁶ resisting objectification.

By imagining ideal worlds and suggesting ideas for positive change, utopian conjectures are primed to grapple with important social, political, and ecological issues, including the fraught yet essential interconnections between humanity and the natural environment. While Kracht’s novel does not overtly address the issue of environmental degradation in the Anthropocene, the text shows aspects of an ‘aesthetics of the Anthropocene,’ as described by Horn. Part of this aesthetic is the rejection of traditional notions of nature (as objectifiable or ‘other’), which fuels the novel’s scathing criticism of nature as utopia, satirising it as ideological extremism and revealing its colonial implications. The novel’s critique is thus two-fold: an utopian framing of nature risks stripping places of their cultural and ecological specificity, including its uncanny or inscrutable aspects. Engelhardt’s extreme egocentrism and epistemological blindness towards his natural environment (metaphorically highlighted by his social isolation and auto-anthropophagic tendencies) is a particularly striking example of this. However, the novel also emphasises the entanglement of utopian narratives of nature in colonial projects:

⁶⁴ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 10.

⁶⁵ Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, p. 30.

⁶⁶ Horn, ‘Challenges for an Aesthetics of the Anthropocene’, p. 162.

they render places into desirable 'empty' space to be occupied and cultivated. Consequently, the speculative potential of utopias as well as their effectiveness as interpretive frameworks for experiences with nature appear severely limited in Kracht's novel.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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