

The Body, Religion, and Planetary Imagination in a Time of Environmental Crisis

May 20th, 10:00—18:30

International Workshop
at the **Humboldt University of Berlin**

Seminar Room / Raum 1.608

Universitätsgebäude am Hegelplatz
(University Building on Hegelplatz)
Dorotheenstrasse 24, 10117 Berlin



Workshop Organizer: Dr. Devin Zuber, Visiting Professor, Humboldt University
Associate Professor of American Studies, Religion, & Literature
at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU), Berkeley

devin.zuber@hu-berlin.de

devinzuber@gmail.com

+49 (0) 163 515 1684

This workshop brings together a leading group of international scholars from the environmental humanities, religion & theology, as well as cultural & literary studies, to collectively discuss a set of questions and challenges provoked by our unfolding environmental crisis. The workshop is open to the broader public and learning communities of the Humboldt University; as space is limited, persons interested in attending are asked to register in advance with the organizer (devinzuber@gmail.com) in order to reserve a place and gain access to advance workshop materials. The workshop also features the opportunity to experience an “inverted virtual reality” artwork, “Symphony of a Missing Room,” created by the artists Christer Lundahl & Martina Seidl, who are also participating in the workshop.

Our conversation begins by observing two related contemporary phenomena:

- 1) the cascading effects of crossing a non-linear tipping point with anthropogenic climate change (à la the most recent 2022 UN Report), a juggernaut which continues to belie the older (and still regnant) presumptions about the ways that global public spheres and their so-called secularity construe relationships between politics and scientific regimes of knowledge production;
- 2) following Dipesh Chakrabarty (with a dash of Bruno Latour), we assume the “geologic force” of the human species remains a significant disruptor to the interpretative frameworks that have guided much writing and research in the humanities over the last

three centuries; not only for the work of the historian, but in disciplines across the board, scholars are now reckoning with older questions of ontology—even of the cosmological (and cosmo-political)—which had long been banished by the flight of metaphysics from the academy.

The workshop is interested in playing with two terms amidst this continued conceptual disruption, an epistemic aftermath of the Anthropocene (perhaps those catastrophic ruins so sadly gazed down on by Walter Benjamin’s famous Angel of History): the **body**, and the **imagination** (or the imaginaries conceived as a collective social practice). Often these two have been conceived as two very different, if not diametrically opposed, sites of meaning-making (i.e., following Descartes and Kant): the imagination works as a transcendentalizing mentation that gets us beyond the limitations of sense perceptions (and their potentially dangerous entanglements with nature as the site of Blut-und-Boden ideologies).

Yet (cueing Alfred North Whitehead’s insistence that “facts are felt”), how might the body, with its sensual affective modes, provide other ways of accessing the geological feelings of the Anthropocene, and perceiving its horizons of deep time? What older elements of personhood, long abandoned by modernity—such as an idea of the soul—might be revived, resituated in the feeling body? Can we explore the imagination less as a disembodied and solitary Cartesian faculty, but as something weirder, a collective connectivity, a *mundus imaginalis* (following Henry Corbin) which threads us to others and unseen worlds? Is it possible to think of a materialized *mundus imaginalis* as a substitute for the humanist project of the *sensus communis*?

While there has certainly been significant work on the body within much New Materialist and ecofeminist criticism—from Stacy Alaimo’s “transcorporality,” to Donna Haraway’s natureculture—rarely have these porous bodies been situated within numinous flows of the imaginal and spiritual. Here, things like the ecstasy and kenosis of mystical states and other bodily modes “far out” in the religious fringe might fruitfully meet the proleptic power of the imagination to extend ourselves into other-than-human beings and larger time scales: in spite of anthropology’s “ontological turn” and attention to other (primarily non-Western) modes of existence, as well as the expansion of “multispecies ethnographies” currently afoot in the environmental humanities, there has not been, arguably, a consistent or coherent attention to what religion or theology might provide here, when it comes to the body or imagination in the Anthropocene

Schedule 20/05/2022

- 9:00-10:00 Lundahl & Seidl's "Symphony of a Missing Room" (register with conference organizer devinzuber@gmail.com for a time slot)
- 10:00-10:15 **Welcome** (Dr. Zuber)
- 10:15-11:00 **Prof. Dr. Whitney Bauman** (Florida International University, USA) – "Developing a Critical Romantic Religiosity for a Planetary Community"
- 11:00—11:45 **Prof. Dr. Kocku von Stuckrad** (University of Groningen, Netherlands) – "Undisciplining the Study of Religion: Critical Posthumanities & More-than-Human Ways of Knowing"
- 11:45—12:30 **Sara-Duana Meyer, MA** (independent Scholar), "The Gestalt of a Rock and Other Fleeting Eternities"
- 12:30--13:30 **Lunch break** – parallel opportunities for experiencing Lundahl & Seidl's "Symphony of a Missing Room" (register with conference organizer devinzuber@gmail.com for a time slot)
- 13:45—14:30 **Prof. Dr. Bron Taylor** (University of Florida / Rachel Carson Center, LMU), "Kinship, Gaia Animism, and Terrapolitan Earth Civilization: Envisioning a Remote Possibility"
- 14:30—15:15 **Dr. Jonathan Kavusa** (Humboldt University of Berlin / Université Libre des Pays des Grand Lacs, Goma / DR Congo), "The Woman's Body as a Locked Garden: An Eco-Sustainability Reading of the *Song of Songs*"
- 15:15—15:45 **Coffee break** -- parallel opportunities for experiencing Lundahl & Seidl's "Symphony of a Missing Room" (register with conference organizer devinzuber@gmail.com for a time slot)
- 15:45—16:30 **Prof. Dr. Martina Bengert** (Humboldt University of Berlin), "Body | Soul. Marina Abramović and Teresa of Ávila"
- 16:30—17:15 **Prof. Dr. Devin Zuber** (Humboldt University of Berlin / Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley, California), "Can Beauty (still) Save the Planet? Eco-Aesthetics for the Anthropocene"
- 17:15—18:00 **Martina Seidl**, artist (Lundahl & Seidl, Stockholm, Sweden),
- 18:00—18:30 **Concluding Remarks / Discussion**

Participant Biographies

Dr. Whitney Bauman is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Florida International University in Miami, FL. He is also co-founder and co-director of *Counterpoint: Navigating Knowledge*, a non-profit based in Berlin, Germany, that holds public discussions over social and ecological issues related to globalization and climate change. His publications include *Religion & Ecology: Developing a Planetary Ethic* (Columbia UP, 2019), and a forthcoming book on the German Romantic scientist Ernst Haeckel.

Dr. Martina Bengert is Junior Professor for Literature and Religion at the Institute for Romance Languages and Literature at the Humboldt University of Berlin, where she also teaches and researches at HU's Center for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies. She has written widely on mysticism and contemporary French literature; recent books include *Nachdenken: Maurice Blanchot's Thomas l'Obscur* (Orbis Romanicus, 2018), and the collected volume of essays *Santa Teresa: Critical Insights, Filiations, Responses* (2019), co-edited with Iris Roebing-Grau.

Dr. Jonathan Kavusa is an Alexander von Humboldt Fellow completing a postdoctoral project on indigenous knowledge and sustainable hermeneutics in Africa while in-residence at the Theology Department of the Humboldt University of Berlin. He holds research and teaching positions in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria (South Africa), and Université Libre des Pays des Grand Lacs (DR Congo). He has published broadly in the interdisciplinary field of eco-theology, including *Water and Water-related Phenomena in the Old Testament Wisdom Literature: An Eco-Theological Investigation* (T&T Clark, 2019).

Sara-Duana Meyer, MA is a political ecologist, cultural producer, educator, researcher, and storyteller working between urbanism, art, fiction, and conservation. She has directed and supported cultural, artistic, and educational projects in Europe, the MENA region, and South Asia for over a decade, and regularly teaches seminars and workshops. More recently, she's been focusing on political ecology and sustainable development, particularly in Costa Rica. She is also a writer and editor with a keen interest for the space in which society, nature, and culture intersect. saraduana.me

Martina Seidl is an artist based in Stockholm, Sweden and London. In 2003, she formed Lundahl & Seidl with fellow artist Christer Lundahl – a transdisciplinary collaboration that explores art's ability to form nomadic imagined communities, acting as a tool for personal and social change. Lundahl & Seidl have received numerous awards for their interactive and immersive projects, with work exhibited at institutions such as (but not limited to): Tate Britain, Whitechapel Gallery, Battersea Arts Centre, and the Royal Academy of Arts in the U.K.; in Germany at the Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berliner Festspiele, Hamburger Kunsthalle, MMK2 and Kunstmuseum Bonn; in France at the Center Pompidou-Metz, and Avignon Festival; in Belgium at S.M.A.K, STUK and Museum M; in Switzerland at the Kunsthalle Bern; in Austria at Steirischer Herbst and Museum der Moderne; in India at the Kochi Muziris Biennalen; in South Korea at the Wooran Foundation; and in the USA, at the SOCAP Festival (San Francisco), and upcoming at M.I.T. (Massachusetts). <http://www.lundahl-seidl.com/>

Dr. Kocku von Stuckrad is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Groningen, Netherlands. He has published extensively on topics related to the cultural history of religion, science, philosophy, as well as the environment. He has served as President of International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, & Culture (ISSRNC), and the Dutch Association for the Study of Religion. Recent publications include *A Cultural History of the Soul: Europe & North America from 1870 to the Present* (Columbia UP, 2020), and a number of articles and chapters on intersections between animal studies, ecology, and environmental ethics. <https://www.kockuvonstuckrad.com/>

Dr. Bron Taylor is Professor of Religion and Environmental Ethics at the University of Florida, and a Fellow of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, Germany. A leading scholar in the field of religion and ecology, his books include *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (2010), the award-winning *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (2005), *Ecological Resistance Movements: the Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism* (1995), and *Avatar and Nature Spirituality* (2013). <https://humansandnature.org/bron-taylor/>

Dr. Devin Zuber is Associate Professor of American Studies, Religion, & Literature at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) in Berkeley, and the George F. Dole Professor of Swedenborgian Studies at the GTU's Center for Swedenborgian Studies. At the GTU he also co-directs Sustainability 360, an incubator for religious studies and the environmental humanities. His most recent monograph, *A Language of Things* (2020) was awarded the Borsch-Rast Book Prize. Presently on sabbatical at the HU in Berlin, he is completing a new book on religion and literature in mid-century American countercultures and co-editing a book of essays about the performance artist Marina Abramović. <https://gtu.academia.edu/DevinZuber>