

**Reflections on Loss:  
Family Memory and the Natural Environment in  
21<sup>st</sup>-Century German Novels**

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The land was like he had imagined it from the old stories - flat and dotted  
with shrubs.  
... Then at night he heard cries and moans carried by the wind and blowing  
snow.  
He heard the voices wavering and rising in the darkness. ...  
The place contained the pain and cries of his relatives, ...  
-- Luci Tapahonso<sup>1</sup>

Even a brief survey of German novels published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will yield numerous examples of narratives that highlight the connection between memory and nature, that is, between humans remembering and the natural environment, such as animals, plants, wind, soil, rocks, mountains, and bodies of water.<sup>2</sup> Despite differences in setting and context, the references to the important role of nature as a conduit and a preserver of human memories as well as a reference point for humans are surprisingly similar. For this article, I will draw upon examples from the following three German novels that illustrate the connection between memory and nature: Tanja Dücker's *Der längste Tag des Jahres* [The Longest Day of the Year] (2006), Jenny Erpenbeck's *Heimsuchung* (2008) [*Visitation* (2010)] and Judith Schalansky's *Der Hals der Giraffe* [The Neck of the Gi-

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from "In 1894" in *Sáanii Dahataal/The Women Are Singing* by the Navajo poet Luci Tapahonso. The narrative tells the story of a man who experiences how the land contains the memories of the forced relocation of 8,354 Navajo in 1894 in southern New Mexico, during which more than 2,500 Navajo died.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term nature or natural environment to pertain to the geo-physical elements in the environment not created directly by humans as well as to non-human animals.

raffe] (2011).<sup>3</sup> I will discuss how each of these authors connects memory and nature by illustrating the human reliance on natural memory objects. Each author also infuses her novel with reflections on contemporary environmental concerns, the relationship between humans and nature and on how humans (mis)treat nature.

The connection between nature and memory in these novels only comes to the forefront because humans attempt to conform nature to their own purposes, gain and enjoyment. In one way or another, in the novels under discussion here, humans attempt to exercise control over nature. It is a “domesticated” nature that is imbued with human memory. Logging, landscaping, exotic animals as pets, and bee keeping, as well as polluting the natural terrain with trash dumping, are just some of the examples of how the novels illustrate the human treatment of nature.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, there is a permanence that the narrators in these novels ascribe to the earth and to nature. They portray nature as a force greater than humans (the idea being that after humans become extinct, nature will remain in some form). The novels also juxtapose different relationships to nature. Some characters attempt to exercise control over nature by creating their desired visions of it, while others are more passive and exert less influence over their environment. Yet, remarkably, despite their admiration and love of nature, none of the characters in these novels take any action to address contemporary environmental concerns. Even those characters that recognize issues, such as global warming or loss of biodiversity, take no action to reduce the human destruction of nature. They remain focused on their personal relationship with nature

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<sup>3</sup> Of these three novels, only Erpenbeck’s *Heimsuchung* has been translated. In this article, I will use the original German title whenever I refer to these novels.

<sup>4</sup> There is a big difference between nature as a geological landscape (such as a forest) and animals. However, in the way authors write “nature” in these novels, animals appear to be simply included in nature and treated similarly to the way humans in the novels regards natural terrain. In both cases, the focus is on domesticated animals, whose environment is controlled by humans. The reader does not encounter animals in the “wild” in these novels.

and look to natural landscapes, or domesticated plants and animals, to facilitate their memories.

The link between the environment and memories was also a concern for the French memory theorist, Maurice Halbwachs. He uses the term “implacement” to refer to the way spaces and artefacts hold the memories of a group (*The Collective Memory* 134-5).<sup>5</sup> Although Halbwachs is chiefly concerned with the social aspect of memory, he also explores how landscapes provide the framework for remembering and how society has embedded memories within the physical landscape that pertain to the social order of the group (Middleton 30-31). He argues that the collective memories of the group are intertwined with the environment the group occupies (*The Collective Memory* 130).

Even though Halbwachs does not focus solely on the environment as natural, geo-physical elements, but includes rather human-made objects, such as streets and homes, his work on implacement contextualizes how German authors link nature to human memories. Halbwachs theorizes that places as well as objects in those places contain memories in so far as memories are formed in a social context. Significantly, if the memory object or place of memory is lost, Halbwachs maintains that the community members then lose a part of themselves: A person with “many remembrances fastened to these images now obliterated forever, feels a whole part of himself dying with these things” (*The Collective Memory* 134). Thus, Halbwachs establishes a close connection between memory, memory objects, and identity.

Considering the connection between nature and memory inevitably brings up questions of place and in the German context, *Heimat* [home]. Axel Goodbody also recognizes the prevalence with which “literary representation of nature appears ... in the context of acts of remembering” in German literature (“Sense of Place ...” 56). In “Sense of Place ...”, he is chiefly concerned with the loss of place attachment, which he implies fosters environmental consciousness.

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<sup>5</sup> Although Halbwachs does not address this, his term implacement brings to mind Native American narratives of the ancestral memories embedded within nature and the land, as in Tapahanso’s poetry.

He argues that understanding “place and place-belonging” through analysis of cultural memory would help ecocritics understand how people “form attachments to places ... and maintain them over time as an integral part of their identities” (57). Using ideas from cultural memory studies, he refers to places as “symbolic entities, remembered and imagined” (57). He ends his article with a call to include considerations of *Heimat* in the examination of German literature despite the problems associated with the concept:

In Germany, sense of place has not enjoyed the same prominence in recent literary criticism as in the United States since conceptions of local belonging having been discredited through association with the “Blood and Soil” ideology of the Third Reich... It may be unwise to dismiss place-identity, and even the nostalgic idealization of places, as factors contributing to a caring attitude towards the environment (66).

I agree with Goodbody’s assessment of place-identity. However, in the novels I examine here, several characters exhibit some sense of place-identity and a “caring attitude” for nature; yet, as I stated above, this concern does not lead to favourable actions for the environment. Furthermore, many of the characters idealize places or plants and animals from places that they consider exotic, rather than places of *Heimat* in German regions. However, Goodbody’s work with nostalgia (in relation to *Heimat*) is important, because it directly relates to memories of the past.<sup>6</sup>

Although a memory object could be virtually anything, interestingly, in many German novels, including those under discussion here, memory is facilitated by memory objects that are connected to the natural environment in some way. Before illustrating the way plants, animals and natural outdoor landscapes function as memory objects, I will begin with two memory objects uniquely connected to nature:

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<sup>6</sup> His discussion of places as identity markers and nostalgia relates to Simon Schama’s work on landscapes as integral to national and group identity. Goodbody briefly acknowledges Schama’s contribution to the field of the study of place and memory, but does not incorporate his ideas into his analysis. I will discuss Schama’s work later in this article.

a piece of wooden furniture, and sand<sup>7</sup>. The first scene in Tanja Dücker's 2006 novel, *Der längste Tag des Jahres* [*The longest day of the year*], connects the memory of loss with natural matter and sets the tone for the rest of the novel.<sup>8</sup> The novel centres on the reactions of five adult siblings to their father's unexpected death. In the first scene, Nana and her boyfriend, Bennie, have just moved into a new apartment and are refinishing an old wooden wardrobe in a sunlit kitchen when a phone call informs them that Bennie's father has died. After the call, Nana is distraught and her tears become embedded in the wardrobe like memory scars: "Ihre Tränen fielen auf die glänzende Holzlasurbahn und hinterließen helle Krater, die sie für immer an diesen Tag erinnern würden" [Her tears fell upon the shiny stroke of wood finish and left behind bright craters, which would always remind her of this day] (20).<sup>9</sup> Nana reflects that from then on, even the smell of wood finish, will remind her of death (29). The wardrobe has a family connection, as it stemmed from Bennie's parents who had stored it in the attic (11). Therefore it was already a memory object of Bennie's family and is now imbued with physical reminders of the day Bennie's father died.

Although this first literary example of a memory object is a piece of furniture, the narrator emphasizes the wood of the piece, the finish being applied to the wood, and the heat of the room and the sun streaming through the window falling upon the wooden piece. The reference to the sun and the heat foreshadows discussions in the novel about global warming and the fact that Bennie's father died on the

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<sup>7</sup> In his book, *The German Forest ...* (2012), Jeffrey Wilson explores the German forest as a "national landscape" containing "the German national essence" starting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and thus lieux de memoire of German culture (3). Dücker's novel uses references to the forest to symbolize the protagonist's German identity and a wooden wardrobe that is a family heirloom that functions as a tombstone for the deceased protagonist.

<sup>8</sup> *Der längste Tag des Jahres* is not the first time Dücker explored questions of memory. In *Himmelskörper* (2003), the protagonist searches for a particularly elusive cloud, termed a *Geschichtsspeicher* and for her family's past. For more on this novel, see Lauren Cohen-Pfister, Anne Fuchs, Jens Stüben, and Caroline Schaumann.

<sup>9</sup> All translations from *Der längste Tag des Jahres* are my own.

hottest day of the year tending his bees. The second natural memory object in the first chapter is sand, which also relates to the rest of the novel, because the desert landscape is an important element throughout the narrative. As Nana continues to reflect upon memory, she recounts that a former lover left behind his footprints in sand by the front door when he left her. She could not bring herself to remove this impression of his former presence for a long time (18). This scene with the sand as a memory object, which physically provides an imprint of the memory of a person lost to the narrator, illustrates how desert animals and miniature desert landscapes in terrariums will embody the memory of lost loved ones later in the novel.

The memory object in Jenny Erpenbeck's novel *Heimsuchung* [*Visitation*] (2008, translated 2010) is essentially a parcel of wooded land at a lake that features a mysterious human figure, the gardener. He has no name and appears at the beginning of the novel and is a constant in the ever-changing landscape of the land. The narrative follows the changes this piece of land undergoes through different owners and inhabitants. The land and the structures built on it over time hold the memory of the individuals associated with it as well as memories of Germany's tumultuous history from the 1910s to post-unification. The gardener works for various landowners, aging very little, and simply disappears at the end of the novel in the 2000s. He is a quiet, mythical figure who speaks only to plants, animals and occasionally to children. In an interview, Erpenbeck explains that the gardener is not an entirely realistic character, but rather a "Bindeglied" [connection] between the long development of the nature at this location as the glacier of the ice age receded and brought the lake to the forefront and the very fast moving history of the humans who occupy this land in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Agathos). *Heimsuchung* is marked by "dem Prozess des Verlierens" [the process of loss] and questions of time and place, including the role of humans in the environment (Agathos).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In the interview with Agathos, Erpenbeck explains that she used a different conception of *Heimat* in each chapter. For more on discussions of *Heimat* in the novel, see Goodbody's 2016 article "Heimat and the place of

All three of the novels appear to tell the tragic stories of family, death and loss, but actually focus on the character's natural environment and its agency alongside humans. In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway argues that humans are but one small part of all the organisms on earth. She advocates for humans to see themselves and other organisms as companion species. Similarly, Schalansky situates the story of humans on earth as a momentary phase in the broader history of the planet. The beginning of *Heimsuchung*, which describes how the lake was created during the last ice age, sets the tone of the novel, that humans are simply a stage in the life of this natural environment. The lake slowly formed to its present-day location, and will someday transform again and disappear (10). Both the land and the humans live side-by-side influencing each other. The building of the house at the site and its demolition at the end of the novel illustrates this point as well. The central positioning of this opening of the novel is that while the stories of the characters may appear tragic, in light of the history of nature and the earth, their human tragedies appear almost trivial. In a radio interview, Erpenbeck explained:

“... natürlich hat es einen großen Reiz ..., dass man sagt, die Geschichten, die im Einzelnen eigentlich zum Teil sehr schrecklich sind ..., werden angesichts dieser großen Erdgeschichte natürlich viel, viel unwichtiger“ (Schenkel).

[...of course there is something enticing about saying that the stories, which are horrific at times, become much less important when seen in light of the great earth's history]

Erpenbeck frames the historical lives of the characters with the way nature in this area developed and would continue to develop. At the same time, the narrator places great significance upon the symbolic value of the land as a repository of the stories of its inhabitants, including her family.

Simon Schama's discussion of the meaning of landscapes is instructive here to help us understand the importance of memory ob-

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humans in the world: Jenny Erpenbeck's '*Heimsuchung*' in ecocritical perspective" in *New German Critique*.

jects or places of memory. While focusing on national identity, his extensive volume covers different types of landscapes, such as woods, water, and rock, and varied cultures and time periods. In each example, Schama illustrates how the landscape (and nature) is invested with human memory, perpetuated over generations (6-7). The ecosystems exist in their own right, alongside humans of course, but the perception of these landscapes rests within the human mind. According to Schama, landscapes are created by the very act of singling out certain natural matter. For example, Yosemite is an area of land that carries significant cultural meaning only because it was set aside and given a name (9-10). Schama aims to “recover the veins of myth and memory that lie beneath the surface” of the human-created landscape (14), as does Erpenbeck’s *Heimsuchung*.<sup>11</sup> For the descendants of the various occupiers of the land in the novel, it has taken on special meaning. In line with Halbwachs’s theories on landscape and memory, the land holds the memories of many families. Erpenbeck’s emphasis on connecting family memory, place and the character of the gardener, a mysterious caretaker of nature, transforms this piece of wooded land into a mythical landscape.<sup>12</sup>

The landscape in *Heimsuchung* thus functions as a memory object. In the 1930s, a Jewish family owns the bathhouse by the lake on part of the land, and a young girl named Dori frequently visits her uncle there. The family is forced to sell the land and attempts to flee. In “Das Mädchen,” the only chapter that does not take place at the lake directly, Dori is in a small cramped dark space hiding from deportation to a concentration camp. However, in her thoughts, she is at the lake, as the memory of her time there sustains her. In her most horrific moments of suffering, she vividly recalls her time at the lake, including the smells, sounds and sights of nature. These scenes illus-

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<sup>11</sup> The land in the novel was considered Nutzwald (a wooded lot for practical use) and its function and meaning changed with the advent of the rail connection to the countryside and Berliners seeking places to vacation around 1910-1920 (Agathos).

<sup>12</sup> According to Erpenbeck, the gardener in *Heimsuchung* is not simply the keeper of the land, but in many ways it belongs to him more than to the various owners who attempt to own it through deals and contracts (Agathos).



trate Halbwachs' theory of implacement, as the characters' identity is intertwined with their relationship to the land.

The land and the figure of the gardener in *Heimsuchung* function as memory objects not only for the narrative, but also for the reader. The wooded area is in many ways the focus of the novel to which what happens to any of the human characters harkens back. It is as if the small area of wooded land were a stage, and the reader were watching the action unfold as the narrative traverses the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, a landscape architect designing the area around a newly built home at the site determines that due to the surrounding shrubs and trees, the meadows constitute a natural "Bühne" [stage] (31). This is an important point, as humans are gazing at nature the way one might observe a play unfolding on stage. In the beginning of the novel, the parcel of land is bequeathed to the youngest daughter of a farmer, Klara. She hallucinates and behaves erratically, but feels a close connection to her land. Many years later, her father sells the land and on the day the contract is signed, Klara commits suicide by walking into the lake (25). The reader is reminded of this woman and her fate throughout the novel, including in the scene in which Dori dies, as various owners occupy the land. The narrator associates the land with the characters' identities and loss of the land constitutes losing a part of oneself for the characters.

Similar to the way Halbwachs and Schama refer to general objects (and places or landscapes) as memory conduits, in the novels I analyse here, the natural objects or sites are imbued with meaning for the characters. This brings to mind Schama's work on landscape and memory. In the section on German culture, Schama focuses in his extensive study on the forest or the woods as "the authentically native German scenery" (95). He traverses the German connection to the woods from the Roman historian Tacitus's description of the Germanic tribes' spiritual connection to nature in *Germania* to the way German philosophers, artists, and authors write the forest in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (102). This connection in German culture and literature between humans and plants and animals, and outdoor landscapes, such as the forest, contextualizes the way contemporary German authors focus on the centrality of nature in the characters' lives, and the way observing nature is emphasized in each novel.

Central to my analysis of how 21<sup>st</sup> century authors focus on nature as a performance stage is an understanding of nature in German culture. The Long Eighteenth Century<sup>13</sup> may be seen as the most formative period in the German relationship to the natural environment. In her book-length study on the German conception of nature, Sabine Wilke explores “the emergence of the modern German environmental imagination from its roots in the writings of discovery and natural history and their visual components [in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century] ...” and concludes that “a specific ecological way of imagining the environment emerges that emphasizes the scenic dimension of nature as environment” (23). Artistic representations of natural landscapes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century render nature as both an unattainable wilderness and the source of rejuvenation and meditation. Caspar David Friedrich’s iconic Romantic painting, *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* [*The Wanderer*] (1818), depicts a man hiking in nature with his back to the viewer. He is looking out at a foggy and indistinguishable rocky landscape that appears to dwarf him. Many of Friedrich’s paintings include a *Rückenfigur* [figure with his or her back to the viewer] that gazes in quiet contemplation at natural landscapes. Most often, the individual is alone with his or her observations or so completely absorbed in the view that they do not interact with others or the viewer of the painting. There is a sense of longing expressed in these paintings, a longing for the vast, yet unattainable natural landscape the lone figure gazes upon. Linda Siegel explains that “the feelings of loneliness and isolation are shared by viewer and artist alike” (133). Solitary observation of nature is also at play in Dückers’s and Schalansky’s novels. It is in the intense moments of observation that nature appears to facilitate the characters’ memories.

One of the key scenes in Schalansky’s *Hals der Giraffe* (2011) [*The Neck of the Giraffe*] that connect memory to nature is an outside assembly the protagonist, Inge Lohmark, a biology teacher, attends at her school. Her memories of her family are interjected with the principal’s speech and her reactions to him and the speech (147-156). The area where the speech is being held reminds Inge of flowers, because she remembers how such speeches were celebrated amidst a

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<sup>13</sup> The period generally ranging from 1699 to the mid-1800s.

sea of flowers during the time of the GDR.<sup>14</sup> Gazing at the entrance to the school reminds Inge of her estranged daughter. Inge also responds to the strong smell of a ginkgo tree, a tree foreign to this region of Germany, and begins to remember her father and the numerous times she accompanied him into the forest to observe animals or collect mushrooms when she was a child (152). He died unexpectedly during a walk alone in the woods, when Inge was thirty years old. These thoughts bring to mind memories of the affair she had with a man she used to accompany to the forest ranger to pick up trees for a community project (166). The affair resulted in a child, which she aborted without telling her lover or her husband. In an earlier scene, Inge recalled that she sometimes dreams of a ten year old boy and the reader is now aware that this is likely the age the aborted child would be. Inge's memories of the loss of her father and her child are brought on by the combination of the ginkgo tree, and the school assembly. Significantly, the tree is a memory object that is not sought out, but one that invades her space and functions as a conduit to her memories.

Significantly, the novel does not simply deal with nature in its content, but, in fact, the very format of the book is connected to nature. The book binding of the first edition hard cover resembles those of 19<sup>th</sup> century German reference works in the natural sciences. The novel is completely focused on Inge's role as a biology teacher. The pages of the novel include headings with biology terms similar to how mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century texts in the natural science by Charles Darwin and Ernst Haeckel<sup>15</sup> (Schiedermaier 198). For example, the term "Blutgruppe" [blood type] is at the top of page 135. Schalansky's unique structure places such headings on each page. However, unlike reference works that provide explanations of the term, the novel deals with the subject heading in a different way than one might ex-

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<sup>14</sup> A significant element that is beyond the scope of this paper is the fact that according to Schalansky, Inge is representative of a post-war generation that spent most of their lives working under the East German regime. It would be interesting to examine this character in light of the relations between real socialism and environmental consciousness.

<sup>15</sup> Ernst Haeckel is a well-known 19<sup>th</sup>-century German scholar of animal and plant life.

pect. The scene on the page marked “Blutgruppe” deals with Inge’s glee (or *Schadenfreude*) that the assignment she has given her students to research their parents’ blood types is likely to uncover a false paternity at home (Erpenbeck 135). For the reader, this scene takes on particular significance after it is revealed that Inge aborted her child from an extra-marital affair. Much of this novel from the teacher’s perspective centres on biological evolutionary matters and the reader follows Inge’s thoughts and movements as she spends most of her time alone and in observation (of her students or nature).

Throughout the novel, Inge observes her students critically as if her students were subjects in a scientific experiment. She believes in the Darwinian concept of natural selection and uses it to judge her students’ academic and physical abilities. After the scene with the ginkgo tree during which her family memories have begun to surface, the principal accuses Inge of neglecting one of her students and allowing her to be bullied. After this conflict with the principal (Inge has essentially failed as a teacher and lost her job), her thoughts turn to the relationship between humans and the environment. During this time, she is supervising and watching her students play Völkerball [dodge ball] outside. This is an important point, as her reflections appear to be a direct result of her observation of the game, in which the best players win and which she states involves “reines Instiktverhalten” [instinctive reactions] (217). She reflects: “Die Sieger waren doch die Fähigsten... In der Natur gab es kein Unrecht ...” [The victors were after all the most competent... There was no unfairness in nature. ...] (217). Inge adds that nature is in constant flux, “ein dynamischer Planet” [a dynamic planet], and that there is essentially no such thing as progress: “Fortschritt, das war ein Denkfehler” [progress was a faulty way of thinking]. She calls humans simply “ein Provisorium” [a transitional phase] and wonders “was würde nach dem Menschen kommen?” [What would come after humans?] (217). As she watches one of her students sprinting across the playing field, she calls her “ein wildes Tier” [a wild animal] (217). She also makes note of the wind, the moving tree branches and how good the fresh air smells (217-19). Although she is supervising her students in class, her gaze is directed at a nature scene from her perspective. Similar to the scene with the ginkgo tree, which brought to

mind memories of her father and the child she aborted, while Inge is observing her students playing dodge ball, she reflects on memories of her adult daughter from whom she is estranged. Thus, her observations of nature facilitate her memories of her family.

Memories of her daughter appear to surface both as a result of the principal's accusations of wrongdoing and watching the outdoor scene of the girls running and playing together. Inge's daughter was severely bullied in school and Inge did not consider it appropriate to help her, because in school she was first and foremost the teacher, not her daughter's mother (218-19). Essentially, in her view, a failing student, a losing athlete, or a victim of violence are simply not intelligent and not strong enough. She focuses on the way all creatures in nature (including humans) are subject to instinct and must persevere or perish based on their abilities. Inge returns home after the dodge ball game and watches her array of fenced in animals in a field, including African ostriches, birds and horses. Despite the fact that the natural scene is described as chaotic, filled with movement and noises (similar to the dodge ball game), the novel ends on an objective tone as the narration turns from Inge's stress at work to detailed descriptions of nature, such as the animals she sees, the weather, or the type of care domestic animals require. This last section of the novel is three pages long and contains only three sentences that are about Inge.

As a flock of crows descend on the field and the sunlight hits it just right, she is mesmerized once again by the smell of the earth and the vision of the animals instinctively reacting to various noises. This scene correlates perfectly to the earlier scene in which Inge watched the girls play dodge ball, as in each case her gaze focuses on the movements of bodies across the field. When Inge does this, it shows that she sees little difference between her relationship with her students and that with the animals she sees. Indicative of her relationship to nature (and her students) as a distant and critical observer, the novel ends with the line: "Inge Lohmark stand am Zaun und schaute" [Inge Lohmark stood at the fence and watched] (222). She observes nature from afar as if she were in a zoo. The descriptions of Inge observing nature and lost in thought bring to mind the iconic Romantic-era figures in Friedrich's paintings gazing at the landscape.

In Dückers' novel, *Der längste Tag des Jahres*, observation of nature and remembering is central to the novel, even more so than in the other two novels. Large terrariums housing geckos and lizards are the focus of Paul Kadereit's living room, and along with the dark-green furniture contribute to the "höhlenartige Charakter des Raumes" [cave-like appearance of the room] (21). Paul appears interested in these miniature, contained landscapes mainly as an observer. A much-used brown pillow in front of the terrarium provides Paul a comfortable viewing spot to watch the creatures for hours at a time in a trance-like state in "das sanfte rote Licht der Tropenlampe der Terrarien" [the soft light of the tropic lights of the terrariums] (157). Paul's children comment that Paul gazes at terrariums containing desert plants and animals in memory of his father's death in the African desert during World War II (201). The memorial function of these terrariums recalls Halbwachs's theories on memory objects. These objects not only serve as a conduit to memories for the protagonist, but these memories are also essential for him to maintain his identity.<sup>16</sup> As Halbwachs explains, memories "are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated" (*On Collective Memory* 47). The desert animals and images of nature in Paul's home perform a mnemonic function, as evidenced by Paul's ritualistic observation. Even Paul's leisure activities, such as hiking in the forest, topics of conversation, or his career as the owner of a pet shop, centre on nature. He exhibits no identity divorced from this environment. Paul dies tending his bees as the result of the heat in his "Wüstenbienenhaus" [desert bees house] on an overly warm summer day, which draws attention to environmental concerns and highlights the hypocrisy of claiming to care about nature and the earth (which Paul does in the novel) on the one hand and continuing to misuse nature for one's own purposes.

As noted earlier, Paul in the role of observer is similar to the *Rückenfiguren* in Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, as the description of Paul gazing at the terrariums shows him from the same view

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<sup>16</sup> Paul dies after his business fails and he is forced to declare bankruptcy. His children attribute his death (a heat stroke) to the failure of his business.

with his back to the living room and his family members, who remark on his quiet contemplation. He gazes at the exotic animals he admired for their ability to survive in the harsh terrain of the desert. Just as the figures in Friedrich's paintings observe landscapes with a sense of longing, there is a distance established between the human onlookers and the object of their gaze. Similarly, rather than travel to the locations, Paul reads about and imagines them and surrounds himself with miniature contained landscapes behind glass, and photographic images of nature on the walls of his home, such as German forest scenes and colourful desert animals (Dückers 21).

Paul's controlled and replicated landscape does not actually represent the nature of his desert animals. He admired the animal's unique and effective forms of "Überlebensstrategie" [survival strategy] (26), but in the terrarium, the animals no longer need to locate food in the desert or survive adverse temperatures. Here is an interesting correlation to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's early approach to the study of botany. Goethe spent considerable time observing various plants in well-maintained gardens, changing the conditions to study the results. However, he soon realized that he must explore these plants in "der freien Welt" to understand how the plants he observed adjust to different conditions (*Naturwissenschaftliche Schriften* 161). The ecosystems Paul (re)creates do not reflect the *real* nature of these animals or the *real* environments of desert animals.

In fact, the novel's last chapter shows Paul's son Thomas, who lives in the desert of the American Southwest in order to illustrate the stark contrast between Paul's ideas about nature and the *real* desert environment. This depiction serves to further highlight the devastating consequences of human pollution. Thomas sees the difference between his father's terrariums and the environment he lives in, noting the lack of animals in the desert: "manchmal schien es ihm als würden alle diese Tiere nur in den Terrarien seines Vaters existieren" [sometimes it seemed to him as if all these animals only existed in his father's terrariums] (Dückers 146). This lack of biodiversity is underscored in the novel by Thomas' description of life in the desert:

Manchmal hatte Thomas sich schon dabei ertappt zu denken: Papa, wenn du

wüßtest, daß ich hier nicht einen Gecko, dafür aber bestimmt zehn ver-seuchte Seen, zwanzig Gefängnisse, fünfzig Müllkippen, hundert Auto-wracks und last but not least: vier Tote gesehen habe. ... Wenn du wüßtest wie veränderbar die Landschaft hier ist ... Hier ist nichts heilig ... (156).

[Sometimes Thomas caught himself thinking: Dad, if you only knew that I have not seen one gecko here, but instead ten polluted lakes, twenty prisons, fifty trash hills, a hundred junk cars and last but not least four dead bodies ... if you only knew how changing the landscape here is ... there is nothing holy here ...]

This statement embodies the novel's discussion of the damage hu-mans have inflicted upon the environment. Despite the bleak picture Thomas paints of the desert, he is content with his life in the sandy and chaotic desert landscape. Although Thomas lives in the desert amidst the sand that has infiltrated everything, included his hair, he simply observes nature, rather than take any action to improve the devastation he has witnessed. Paul is chiefly concerned with caring for his animals by designing and creating his vision of an ideal eco-system and using nature as a means to be close to his father's memory. Thomas, on the other hand, photographs the landscape as it is, and his five-year old son, Sami, simply enjoys sitting for hours gazing at the desert without doing anything else. Each generation in the family, Paul, Thomas, and Sami are essentially Rückenfiguren, observing nature, though only for Paul and Thomas is it clear that the desert-related nature is a memory object.

Manipulating nature to make it aesthetically pleasing is a recurrent theme in the novels I have discussed in this article. In Dücker's novel, Paul works hard to control nature and make it aesthetically pleas-ing to him. He seeks to remove the dirt and chaos by placing his desert plants, sand and animals in meticulously contained terrariums. Similarly, in Erpenbeck's *Heimsuchung*, nature serves an aesthetic purpose. In the 1940s, the new owner instructs the gardener to de-stroy the flora of the wooded parcel by removing trees and other plants to create an elaborate garden. The owner remarks to the gar-dener: "Die Wildnis bändigen und sie dann mit der Kultur zusam-men-zustoßen lassen, das ist die Kunst ... Sich der Schönheit, un-abhän-gig davon, wo man sie findet, zu bedienen ... " [to tame the wilderness and then make it intersect with culture, that's what art is



... to avail oneself of beauty regardless of where one finds it] (32). For this character, not only is it nature's purpose to provide humans with enjoyment, nature is only beautiful once it is infused with human culture. Paul's exploitation of his exotic animals both for his own enjoyment and for his livelihood in *Der längste Tag des Jahres* could also be described as a form of "bändigen" [to tame] and "sich bedienen" [to avail oneself of]. In both cases, humans try to conform nature to make it more appealing and scenic.

Each novel I have discussed here explicitly draws attention to ecological concerns.<sup>17</sup> Highlighting this connection by way of natural memory objects allows Dücker, Erpenbeck and Schalansky to situate ecological concerns firmly grounded in our time period, rather than in a work of apocalyptic fiction. It is striking to see the number of recent German novels specifically dealing with global warming, environmental destruction, and global inequities in energy resources.<sup>18</sup> An equally prominent discourse in recent German literature has been the emphasis on memory, fictional autobiographies, childhood accounts and family novels covering multiple generations. There are a number of novels beyond the three I have discussed here that touch upon both the human relationship to their natural environment and family or personal childhood memories.<sup>19</sup> My contribution bridges an analysis of memory and nature with a discussion of

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<sup>17</sup> A poignant example is *Eistau* (2013) by Ilija Trojanow, whose protagonist is obsessed with a melting glacier and the implications of global warming. It is clear that Trojanow, an environmental activist, intended to educate readers.

<sup>18</sup> Frank Schätzing's *Der Schwarm* (2004) and Dirk C. Fleck's science fiction novel *Maeva!* (2011) center on climate change, while Hannah Dübgen's *Strom* (2013) focuses in part on inequities in global energy resources.

<sup>19</sup> Two recent examples are Peter Wawerzinek's *Rabenliebe* (2010) and Yoko Tawada's *Etüden im Schnee* (2014). In *Rabenliebe*, a boy abandoned in a children's home in the former GDR develops a close relationship to a bird and imagines that the bird is his connection to his mother. The bird, trees and snow fall feature prominently in the boy's childhood narrative, although many of his memories are fabricated. *Etüden im Schnee* breaks down human non-human barriers as it follows a family of bears with human characteristics through 20<sup>th</sup> century historical upheavals.

the treatment of the environment. The focus on governance of eco-systems, whether in miniature terrariums or meticulously designed garden landscapes reflect human destruction and greed. The novels foreground the characters' instrumental relationship with nature in order to highlight human misperceptions and abuse of natural environments in all these conceptions. They offer readers the impetus to recognize the detriments of the traditional binary view of human and nature, within which the human is dominant and nature serves a function for human economic productivity, enjoyment, and personal fulfilment. This portrayal serves to engage the reader in questions of environmental justice.

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