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LITERATURE AS LEVERAGE
TEACHING AND RESEARCH AS THE BASIS FOR ACTIVISM
IN THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

A funny thing happened to Frank Schätzing, author of *Der Schwarm* (2004), a dystopic climate thriller about oceans seeking revenge against humanity, as he set out to write his next novel. »Eigentlich wollte ich ein ganz anderes Buch schreiben, einen Thriller. Dann dachte ich: Wir sind in einem Thriller. Sie und ich. Nicht als Leser und Autor. Als Akteure.«¹ The result of Schätzing's arresting insight was a work of non-fiction: *Was, wenn wir einfach die Welt retten? Handeln in der Klimakrise* (2021). Repurposing the conventions of a genre known for gripping its readers, Schätzing found engaging ways to raise awareness about the dimensions and causes of the climate crisis and our inadequate response. He countered Western defeatism, apathy, and blame-placing with bracing critique. »In einer Zeit, in der mehr geht denn je, erzählen wir einander, was nicht geht. Das ist lächerlich.«² He gave practical and compelling advice about how to get active at multiple levels. He ended his book with a question and an answer: is it worth fighting for the best possible outcome under uncertain circumstances? »Unbedingt!«³

Something like what happened to Schätzing happened to me, too. In the middle of a rewarding career of teaching and researching German literature, culture and film, with a tendency towards topics relating to sex, gender, and the body and a stake in maintaining a reputation in Goethe studies, I was – while teaching Goethe's *Faust* – overcome by a mounting awareness of the climate emergency and the necessity to respond *for the sake of my students*. With each passing year, Act 5, Part II with its account of Faust's grandiose land reclamation project and its collateral damage, the murder of Philemon and Baucis, loomed larger in my interpretation and weighed heavily on my mind. Thanks to Marshall Berman, I recognized Philemon and Baucis as »the first embodiments in

1 Frank Schätzing, *Was, wenn wir einfach die Welt retten? Handeln in der Klimakrise*, Köln 2021, p. 11.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 332.

3 *Ibid.*

literature of a category of people that is going to be very large in modern history: people who are in the way – in the way of history, of progress, of development; people who are classified, and disposed of, as obsolete.«⁴ »Goethe's point,« as Berman sums it up, »is that the deepest horrors of Faustian development spring from its most honorable aims and its most authentic achievements.«⁵

Just how large is this category of obsolete people? Our fossil-fueled economies kill Philemon and Baucis with impunity every day, thousands of times over. It is commendable that Berman recognizes their existence and what he calls their tragic-ironic function in the Faustian logic of creative destruction. What bothers me is how narrowly the category is specified. Because of their ancient provenance, there is a tendency to associate them with an obsolete pastoral ethos. Is radical hospitality obsolete? Is living with nature irrelevant? Whether in 1832 when Goethe completed *Faust* or in 1986 when Berman published his books, the sheer number of indigenous, enslaved, migrant, precarious, vulnerable and frontline communities in the Global South and North defies cavalier technodicies that justify the rash and slow violence of fossil-fueled development. As we expel ourselves and others from the Holocene, that comfortable geological epoch that favored the unfolding of humanity, and enter a period of unprecedented climate instability that strains our natural and human systems beyond capacity, the numbers of dying and displaced will swell. We will need the wisdom and hospitality of Philemon and Baucis more than ever.

Could I carry on as usual? Hardly. What used to be a large and popular lecture course known as *The Devil's Pact in Literature, Music, and Film* transmuted into something entirely different. It is now called *Water Worlds: Cultural Responses to Sea Level Rise and Catastrophic Flooding*. The story of Philemon and Baucis is the only thing that survived the transformation. Mind you, this is not just a matter of installing new textual furniture. Ranging from *Gilgamesh* to Schätzing's *Der Schwarm*, the new course *uses* literature and film to help students in three ways: 1) to become informed about the climate emergency and its social and ecological dimensions; 2) to articulate and work through feelings of horror, anxiety, grief, and anger; and 3) to develop what my colleague Bethany Wiggin calls an »ecotopian toolkit«⁶ for surviving in the Anthropocene. Will it surprise you that literature is an important tool in the box? While teaching this course, I have discovered that literature is, in one way or another, almost always about community. Whether things work out well or not

4 Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, New York 1982, p. 67.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

6 Bethany Wiggin, *Ecotopian Toolkit*, 2022, <https://ppeg.sas.upenn.edu/experiments/ecotopian-toolkit> (15.2.2022).

often depends on how resilient that community is. The novels and films the course engages with offer compelling evidence that seeking out, belonging to, and cultivating community are effective ways of preparing for the climate change impacts already hitting home. To that end, an explicit course goal that students must embrace to remain enrolled is to become acquainted with dedicated and impassioned people involved in a wide range of community-based climate action. In other words, I am not only an activist, but also an »activation-ist«. I enable my students to become active.

For many, activism boils down to demonstrations, sit-ins, and other attention-seeking political acts. A small percentage of people participate in these public activities. Any overlap with their profession is probably accidental. I am not saying they are not useful – I have participated in many myself –, but this is not the kind of activism I mean. In fact, I am not sure that activism is the right word. My notion of activism is best expressed with the term »leverage«. The climate emergency calls for the kind of action that brings about transformative and systemic change. That seems daunting. To the question »What can I do?« I answer: leverage what you have. In my case, that is my academic position with its emoluments and protections, my reputation and stature in the profession and university, my training in the interpretation and analysis of literature and film, my languages (German, Dutch, a smattering of Indonesian), my contact with students, and my desire to do right by them. That is my leverage and I use it to help students find ways to live meaningfully in the climate emergency. When the purpose lies outside of yourself, it is remarkable what you will dare to accomplish.

Is it random that I as a professor German initiated my university's 1.5 Minute Climate Lecture⁷ series? Or that I persuaded the university's provost to allow me to organize Climate Week at the University of Pennsylvania⁸ with the express purpose of raising awareness about the climate emergency among students, faculty and staff and providing them with paths to climate action? To the befuddled trustee who is trying to figure out why a professor of German is in that position and making such demands, it may indeed seem random. I see it differently. I am merely using my leverage as a community-engaged educator.

Opening up to the climate emergency has transformed my research. Rising waters have carried me to places I never imagined. Nowadays, my research partners are experts in climate adaptation and water governance, landscape archi-

7 Cf. Anya Tullman, Penn Professors Discuss Global Warming in »1.5 Minute Climate Lectures«, *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, 18.9.2019, <https://www.thedp.com/article/2019/09/1-5-minute-climate-lecture-upenn-college-penn> (15.2.2022).

8 Cf. Katherine Unger Baillie, Learn, Reflect, and Act during Climate Week, 2021, <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/learn-reflect-and-act-during-climate-week> (15.2.2022).

pects and designers, city planners and urbanists. Our projects aim at increasing community-based, future-oriented climate adaptation through novel participatory processes in the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, and Indonesia. Nothing and everything prepared me for the role I play. It was not obvious to anyone that a scholar of literature would be an asset. But storytelling, imagination, and cultural awareness are in high demand. Narrative maps onto process; imagination involves the future and seeing ways to do things differently; intercultural understanding underlies and enables interaction. My humanist skill set uniquely equips me for this role in ways my non-academic partners and academic collaborators affirm. I have adapted the stock-in-trade of my discipline – the analysis, interpretation, and critique of narrative – into a method of creative reflection about the cultural process of climate adaptation itself.

My climate-engaged research differs from conventional research in the humanities in three ways: it is collaborative, creative, and solution-based. As such, it is easier to integrate my research with undergraduate teaching and mentoring. Recently, I have embarked on a project with a professor of fine arts who specializes in animation. We have assembled a team of undergraduate researcher-animators. Together, we are creating a series of animated videos⁹ to inform water sector professionals, policy makers, and the public about the impact of accelerated sea level rise in the Netherlands and to contribute to the debate about the best adaptive approach. As we write scripts and create storyboards, we consult with Dutch experts to make sure that our message is accurate and on target. Working at the nexus of climate and culture, the students astound me with their ability to translate complex adaptation issues into arresting stories with animated visuals.

For my money, the best articulation of how leverage works comes from novelist Octavia Butler. Her cli-fi adaptation of the parable of the talents¹⁰ teaches that when you leverage all your possibilities and your influence in the service of climate justice, you inevitably create more possibilities, increase your influence, and expand your community. The climate emergency bears down on everyone. It is emotionally grueling to maintain the cognitive dissonance between extreme urgency and academic routine. It is a relief to discover that an activism based on leveraging literature and putting students and future generations first can bring you joy – even in the midst of a thriller with daunting odds and uncertain outcomes. Literature is leverage. Let us use it.

9 Cf. Brandon Baker, ›Poldergeist: Videos Make Knowledge of Climate Change Accessible, 2021, <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/poldergeist-videos-make-knowledge-climate-change-accessible> (15.2.2022).

10 Cf. Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, New York 2019.