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Settled and Unsettled Spaces: Property and Ecological Networks in Sophie von La Roche's *Erscheinungen am See Oneida*

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ABSTRACT

In Sophie von La Roche's novel *Erscheinungen am See Oneida* (1797/98), property not only functions as a category that assists the "imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere" (as G. C. Spivak postulates for the processes of globalization); La Roche also emphasizes the bioconnective dimensions and the corresponding ethical limitations of access. La Roche's valiant settlers and their environment are emphatically understood as a holistic, living entity with a shared ecology. A specific form of early 'global' property and its (quasi planetary) modification are instructively intertwined here. In view of the 'planetary turn', the different layers of La Roche's complex understanding of property, on the whole indicative of the eighteenth century, are worth revisiting in order to better understand where systemic and scalar shifts, ruptures and/or continuities occur.

KEYWORDS

Property; nature; eighteenth century; John Locke

Property – as a set of rules governing access to and control of land or other material resources – features prominently in Sophie von La Roche's *Erscheinungen am See Oneida* (1797/1798). The novel proves to be an instructive and innovative text at the intersection of property theory, the theory of nature, colonialism, and utopian experiment, all presented in an extensive report which the first-person narrator sends back from the 'New World' to his 'Freundin' in Europe. The narrator predominantly focuses on his conversations with the protagonists in the novel, a young French couple: the Wattines fled the French Revolution and joined the colony the narrator visits, after spending an all-important stint on a deserted island in the Oneida Lake (situated in what is now New York state). La Roche's detailed descriptions drew on information she had received from her son, Fritz von La Roche, who lived for extended periods in New York and Maryland,¹ as well as on a selection of pertinent sources about life in the 'New World'.² The novel can thus claim a certain (if varied) historical accuracy.

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¹Barbara Becker-Cantarino, *Meine Liebe zu Büchern: Sophie von La Roche als professionelle Schriftstellerin* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2008), 124.

²Victor Lange, "Visitors to Lake Oneida: An Account of the Background of Sophie von la Roche's Novel *Erscheinungen Am See Oneida*," *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures* 2, no. 1 (1948): 48–78

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Accordingly, La Roche's main storyline about Emilie and Carl Wattines loosely follows the remarkable lives of "Des Watines" who "had squatted, for more than a year, on a small island in Lake Oneida."³ La Roche transforms their lives into an environmental success story which also entails a carefully adjusted account of their 'squatting' episode. In her narrative, the Wattines are officially assigned the uninhabited island for provisory use; toward the end of the novel, congress even confers Carl with proper ownership titles, explicitly understood as a reward for his "Geschichte und [...] Verdienste."⁴

This article seeks to illustrate three points: first, a close analysis of La Roche's novel demonstrates how she both sustains and subverts prominent property theories; second, it shows how this intervention is driven by a specific engagement with 'nature.'⁵ In order to understand this particular connection more fully, a large part of the argument is dedicated to the analysis of a twofold relationship between human and extra-human natures in the novel which considers the place people have within 'nature' as well as the impact they have on 'nature.' La Roche implies that any form of morally owned property, in particular land, is inherently regulated by ethical laws that regard nature as a living entity, a partner rather than an object of dominion and a subject in a relationship of mutual reliance rather than an object. These preconditions fundamentally change and restrict ownership. La Roche's property 'theory' throws into sharp relief that, even in a period featuring the accelerated establishment, enforcement, and sedimentation of Western property laws, property – as a relation between 'persons' and 'things' – appeared far less monolithic and teleological than one might retrospectively expect.

The third strand of my argument which runs through the entire article scrutinizes La Roche's ideas through the lens of two (competing) models, namely 'globalization' and 'planetarity.'⁶ The latter is here understood as "a transcultural phenomenon" which seeks to offer a "critical-theoretical" alternative to "the totalizing paradigm of modern-age globalization"⁷ with an ethical "thrust":⁸ "[T]he world commons so grasped are not universalist, homogeneous, monocultural, or monological. They imply a complex planetary network including nested but nonhierarchical cultural and material ecosystems—commutual constellations, sites, and forms of life ranging in scale but acknowledging, serving, and honoring a shared, affectively and materially interrelated, inhabited world space."⁹ For Christian Moraru and Amy J. Elias, the materiality of globalization on the other hand "has the tendency of becoming a consistent oneness wedded to selfsameness, a homogenous and 'defacing' or disfiguring whole impervious to smaller figures, cultural rhetorics, and voices."¹⁰

³Lange, "Visitors," 59.

⁴Cf. Sophie von La Roche, *Erscheinungen am See Oneida. Drittes Bändchen*, ed. Claudia Nitschke, Yvonne Pietsch (Hanover: Wehrhahn, 2022), 413 (in the following: EO with corresponding page number). It is striking that Carl Wattines insists that he would only accept the island in compensation for some engineering work in the colony. Cf. the following on work ethos: EO 71–72.

⁵Nature is here understood as a complex network of cultural-biological interactions seen through a historically and culturally specific lens; it is as such contingent on context. The narrator and the protagonists elaborate on their specific perspectives and interpretations of nature, which I will explore in detail in the following.

⁶Cf. in particular Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru, "Introduction: The Planetary Condition," in *The Planetary Turn: Relationality and Geoaesthetics in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Amy J. Elias, Christian Moraru (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), xi–xii.

⁷Ibid., xi.

⁸Ibid., xii.

⁹Ibid., xxiv.

¹⁰Ibid., xxi. Cf. also the notion of *Oneworldedness* in Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London, New York: Verso, 2013), 70–98.

Moraru's and Elias's framing of planetarity and globalization is of course much more intricate. Nevertheless, I will heuristically focus on these main aspects in order to track how these complex 'planetary' and – broadly speaking – global paradigms play out in the eighteenth century. As *Erscheinungen* is set in an (allegedly) 'uninhabited' space in the 'New World,' the novel enters a very specific double-bind: by implying that the Wattines legitimately appropriate hitherto unowned land (thus tying it to the *Terra Nullius* discourse), the text suggests that the (moral) ideas which underpin Wattines's personal story should be regarded as universally applicable. Furthermore, La Roche's expressly pluralistic, ethical, and 'bioconnective' mode of enquiry, which mirrors important facets of 'planetarity,' is not only buttressed and inspired by theories with global reach (in particular natural history), but also proves particularly effective in 'totalizing' exclusive property as an indispensable, moral institution. The specific entanglement of global and planetary paradigms (along said lines) in the eighteenth century shows that they occurred in combination despite their – in theory – dichotomous characteristics; this amalgamation does not only concern the phenomena under investigation, but also their inherent (critical) thrust.

In her multi-faceted novel, La Roche aspires to give an encyclopedic overview of contemporaneous social, scholarly, and scientific discourses to which she adds observations on the complex intricacies of post-revolutionary political life in Europe, national character, and gender roles. In the following, however, I will chiefly focus on the specific interrelation of property and nature.

Property and Natural Law

In *Erscheinungen*, the idea of (land) ownership takes shape at the intersection of space (as an abstract category), place (as a space imbued with meaning), and territory. Any territorial arrangement in the novel is understood and legitimized as the consequence of a binding, mutual, and thus ostensibly legitimate agreement with the tribes in situ¹¹ – even though, historically, these diverse 'contracts' turned native lands into fungible property¹² and commodified them.¹³ For La Roche, the difficult question of 'territory' was settled with the recent founding of the United States of America. Within this given framework, she examines the 'natural' and hence legitimate appropriation of the hitherto 'unowned,' loosely basing the island episode on the popular genre of Robinsonades.¹⁴ Space in La Roche's novel thus appears

¹¹"Unsere Fischer haben gesagt, daß diese Indier sehr gut sind, wir fanden es auch in der Treue, mit welcher sie das dem Congreß gegebene Versprechen halten, die Insel und das gegenseitige Ufer nie zu betreten." (EO, 201)

¹²Cf. Allan Greer, *Property and Dispossession: Natives, Empires and Land in Early Modern North America* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2017).

¹³Cf. Henry Jones, "Property, territory, and colonialism: an international legal history of enclosure," *Legal Studies* 39, no. 2 (2019): 187–203.

¹⁴Cf. with regard to property, Wolfram Schmidgen, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Law of Property* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 32–62. Cf. also Hilary on La Roche in the tradition of utopian writing: Brown Sarah Scott, "Sophie von La Roche, and the Female Utopian Tradition," *The Journal of English and German Philology* 100, no. 4 (2001): 469–81. The rural isolation in which the Wattines eventually raise their children also echoes principles expounded on in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile*. The Wattines, by contrast, as eager proponents of cultivated sociability, are determined to provide their children with "europäische Nachbarn" (EO, 322). However, civilization per se, which is critically discussed in the novel, is not a guarantee for ethics or cultural progress: culture proper proves to be distinctly moralized in the novel. Thus La Roche's concept of civilization vs. culture resembles Kant's explorations in *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*. (Cf. Kant, AA VII, 26)

primarily as a “relation of property, a finite resource that is distributed, allocated and owned.”¹⁵

Naturally, colonization remained intimately connected to the question of exclusive ownership and was thus, especially in its early stages, a significant driving force for fundamental debates around property and ownership (in particular in natural law). Although La Roche attempts to offer an account of appropriation that explicitly breaks away from the notion of race, she still consciously builds on the notion of improvement and progressive culturalization, which, as I will show in the following, ultimately disenfranchises indigenous people.¹⁶

La Roche’s take on property is not only influenced by similar scenarios in Robinsonades, but also coincides with crucial elements in natural law theory in Europe.¹⁷ John Locke, for example, holds that property rests on three assumptions, one of which is the appropriation through labor – the others concern spoilage¹⁸ and sufficiency.¹⁹ The premises of his appropriation theory have been widely debated and remain controversial. For Locke, the individual acquisition of land occurs legitimately when it is ‘mixed’ with labor: “The *Labour* of his Body, and the *Work* of his Hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the State that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his *Labour* with, and joyned to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *Property*.”²⁰ By assigning property rights to the ‘makers,’ Locke places an emphasis on what James Tully calls the ‘workmanship model’:²¹ “man is to come to have property in his own workmanship by working in a God-like fashion [...] labour, therefore, is a moral activity in two senses. Not only does it take place within the context of, and is the means of, performing moral duties, it is a moral form of activity itself.”²²

While the legal processes differ in La Roche’s novel, some ideas seem strikingly analogous. Carl invokes the fates of the original couple Adam and Eve after the Fall, namely, to cultivate the earth “by the sweat of his brow” (Gen 3.19) and “to give birth in pain” (Gen 3.16), which he delicately adapts for his purposes: “und sie in der Uebung der

¹⁵Stuart Elden, “Land, terrain, territory,” *Progress in Human Geography* 34, no. 6 (2010), 799–817, 812. Cf. also Stuart Elden, *Birth of Territory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1–18.

¹⁶Culturalization as a process is obviously linked to race, as in the novel the Native Americans are still due to embark on it. Cf. Brenna Bhandar on the intrinsic coupling of private property and racial categories: Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). Cf. on the example of Australia: Brenna Bhandar, ‘Title by Registration: Instituting Modern Property Law and Creating Racial Value in the Settler Colony,’ *Journal of Law and Society* 42, no. 2 (2015): 253–82, 257.

¹⁷Stephen Buckle, *Natural Law and the Theory of Property: Grotius to Hume* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 190. For the German context specifically, cf. not only Samuel Pufendorf’s reflections on property, preceding Lockean thoughts (in *De iure naturae et gentium*, 1672 and *De officio hominis et civis, prout ipsi praescribuntur lege naturali*, 1673), but also Christian Thomasius’s *Drey Bücher der Göttlichen Rechtsgelahrheit* [...] (1709), Christian Wolff’s *Grundsätze des Natur- und Völkerrechts* (1754) and Gottlieb Hufeland’s *Versuch über den Grundsatz des Naturrechts* (1785). In the following, I will – for brevity and clarity’s sake – focus mainly on John Locke’s highly influential core ideas on property (namely how rights over unoccupied property were acquired through creative labor) whose repercussions are tangible in La Roche’s novel.

¹⁸One can only appropriate as much as one can use before it spoils, cf. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 290 (chapter 5, § 31).

¹⁹One must leave “enough, and as good” for others, Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 288.

²⁰Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 287–88.

²¹James Tully, *A Discourse on Property: John Locke and His Adversaries* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 4. Cf. Gopal Sreenivasan on the difference between ‘creator’ and ‘maker’: *The Limits of Lockean Rights in Property* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 74–92.

²²Tully, *Discourse*, 110.

Pflichten ihres Erdenlebens glücklich machte: *Kinder zu erziehen*, wie ich dem ursprünglichen Beruf folgte, das *Feld zu bauen* und damit Mutter und Kind zu ernähren.” (EO, 268; emphasis in the original).²³ Carl derives two key life principles from this biblical narrative: education (child-rearing) and agriculture. Dovetailing with Carl’s analysis, Emilie expresses her concern about the South and North Americans since they do not take to ‘tillage’ and ‘stock-breeding,’ as essentially ordered by the Bible, which prevents them from forming proper “gesellschaftliche [...] Verbindungen” (EO, 266). In the novel, (agri-)cultural advancement historicizes and eventually supplants the scriptural theme:

Wir fanden uns auch unendlich glücklicher, als Adam und Eva nicht waren, weil sie nur wußten, daß sie eine unzählbare Nachkommenschaft haben würden, wir aber in unserer Moral, Natur- und Kunstgeschichte sehen konnten, was diese Millionen und Milliarden von ihren Enkeln durch Jahrtausende hin, mit sich, ihren Fähigkeiten und allen übrigen Geschöpfen der Welt gemacht hatten. (EO, 272)

Carl Wattines’s firm belief in cultural progress resonates with thoughts Johann Gottfried Herder developed in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (1774) and *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784). Here Herder presumed a progressive, teleological realization of humanity and reason through the course of history.²⁴ La Roche’s emphasis on ‘improvement,’ which she understands and justifies within these larger schemes of world history, explains why the Wattines value agriculture over other forms of use:²⁵ not only do they invest their labor (which they naturally own) in the unowned land, they ‘improve’ or, quite literally, ‘cultivate’ the island through their hard work.²⁶ By virtue of these merits, the Wattines eventually assume legal ownership over the island:

denn wir hatten so eben, mit allen Colonisten eine Vorstellung an den Congreß unterschrieben, in welchem wir *die Geschichte und die Verdienste der Wattines*, nebst unsern Wünschen bekannt machten, daß der vortreffliche Wattines als Ingenieur und Baumeister der Stadt Oneida angestellt werde, und die kleine *von ihm angebaute Insel* zum Eigenthume erhalte. “(EO, 413, my emphases)

While Locke’s and La Roche’s arguments resemble each other in these premises, the latter departs in significant respects from the former: first, Carl’s property is expressly disconnected from any form of monetary circulation in which it would yield profits beyond nostalgic sentiments.²⁷ Second, and this is indeed crucial for the following argument, La Roche offers a different outlook on nature: Locke understands the laws of nature as laws of reason, thus supplying a new, ‘natural’ authority neither derived from religion nor from sheer force. Nicole Graham argues that these seminal ideas, based on an all-decisive dichotomy between ‘nature’ and ‘culture,’²⁸ fed into the paradigm of

²³This notion was indeed not uncommon in Robinsonades, cf. Jürgen Fohrmann, *Abenteuer und Bürgertum: Zur Geschichte der deutschen Robinsonade im 18. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1981), 67.

²⁴Cf. also John K. Noyes, *Herder: Aesthetics against Imperialism* (Toronto: University Press of Toronto, 2015). In terms of his analytical, self-critical stance on imperialism, Herder is, despite many similarities, distant from La Roche.

²⁵Similar to Locke, cf. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London: Verso, 2002), 158.

²⁶Stephen Buckle sees this as a central tenet in Locke’s theory: “The workmanship model can serve to remind us that Locke’s concern is not accumulation per se (unlimited or otherwise), but improvement.” Buckle, *Natural Law*, 153.

²⁷For this question of capitalist accumulation cf. Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*, 113.

²⁸Nicole Graham, *Lawscape: Property, Environment, Law* (London: Routledge, 2011), 23–50. This specific terminological dichotomy does not exist in La Roche’s more intricate concept of ‘nature’. Cf. the following.

modern (English) property law. Within the specific logic of this vocabulary, the relationship between people and place was conceptualized as unilateral: human agency drove the culturalization and any environmental change associated with it. For the legal structure, the concrete place proved irrelevant, as it was subsumed under a universally applicable law: "The concept of exclusive property in land, as a norm to which other practices must be adjusted, now was extending across the whole globe, like a coinage reducing all things to a common measure."²⁹ Jeremy Bentham's observation in *Theory of Legislation* that the quality of the owned 'thing' was of no pertinence is also relevant here, as the abstract relationality of ownership overrode the specific quality of 'things.'³⁰ In this sense, Graham holds that "[t]he notion of unilateral alienation renders the modern paradigm of property, placeless."³¹

Instead of fully aligning herself with the abstract relationality of the modern property model, La Roche questions both the notion of human agency as the unilaterally culturizing force and the placeless quality of property. For La Roche, people and place appear to be inseparable, intrinsically connected and mutually constructive. Similarly, 'nature' and 'culture' are not seen as dichotomous: extra-human and human natures rather co-produce a 'web of life.'³² While her notion of property is predicated on improvement through knowledge-driven work, she is at the same time acutely aware of the dangers of limitless exploitation and focuses extensively on the 'natural' boundaries to the Wattines's use-rights. For her, progress and *perfectibilité* are closely intertwined with the moral rules of (human and extra-human) coexistence. The novel can be read as a utopian antithesis to contemporaneous exploitations; however, the naturalization of property within an ethical framework again draws attention to the carefully selected premises for La Roche's thought experiment. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, she somewhat anti-cyclically focuses on an isolated agrarian community which consists of one single self-sufficient family (and later a community of settlers with a slightly larger radius), thus avoiding the historical intricacies and the question of conquest. While critically opposing many aspects of Empire, she never fully acknowledges colonialism as an indispensable historical premise for Carl's and Emilie's American success story.

Sophie La Roche and 'Nature'

The Western notion of property transforms concrete places into abstract, bounded entities which are controlled by the respective owners. However, as Allan Greer points out, land "is inextricably attached to a specific environment. Water runs over its surface and collects underground; weeds, insects and fires cross its boundaries; the trees that grow on a lot and the buildings erected upon it affect the currents of air and the exposure to sun of neighboring properties; access to roads, waterways and utilities necessitate arrangements that connect different properties and common spaces."³³ Such complex, dynamic interactions between

²⁹E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (London: Merlin Press, 1991), 164.

³⁰Cf. Jones, "Property, territory, and colonialism," 187–203. Jones emphasizes that the techniques of land abstraction at the root of private property in land emerged in conjunction with colonial practice.

³¹Graham, *Landscape*, 45.

³²Cf. Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London, New York: Verso, 2015)

³³Greer, *Property*, 12. Cf. also the illuminating account of place in Kate Rigby, *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* (Charlottesville, London: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 57–91.

different clusters of organic and inorganic matter (of which ‘land’ consists outside of reductive maps and land registers) challenge any clear demarcations on which property ultimately depends. La Roche pays attention to these sprawling networks and concludes – as mentioned above – that the manifold connections between human and extra-human natures are multilateral, reciprocal and, moreover, regulated by an inherent moral order of ‘nature,’ thus placing the idea of ‘nature’ at the heart of her property model.

The attitudes toward ‘nature’ in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were multifaceted and subject to fast-paced change: La Roche dedicated the entire second volume of *Briefe an Lina* (a tripartite series of “Verhaltensschriften und Wissensvermittlung für junge Frauen,” which appeared in 1785, 1795, and 1797)³⁴ to natural history, holding that it is the duty of a good soul “*alle unsere Nebengeschöpfe zu kennen – Dieses verleitet mich, zur Erleichterung des Unterrichts für deine Töchter einen Auszug der belehrenden Naturgeschichte zu schreiben.*”³⁵ She explicitly understands human and extra-human natures as co-created³⁶ and ascribes immediate moral value to the study of natural history. Appealing to “heart and reason,” La Roche lays out a systematically ordered account of nature (in ever-ascending, increasingly comprehensive categories) across an impressively curated 249 pages, emulating narrative techniques pioneered by the French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon. Although natural history is important, natural history proves more significant.³⁷ A similar emphasis can be found in *Erscheinungen*, where La Roche develops a normative take on nature as an inclusive ecology. Two aspects are important in this context: first, she sees people as part of nature, not as exterior or per se superior. Such perspective, secondly, requires a different set of ethics which is founded in mutuality, reciprocity, and human accountability.

People as part of the natural ecology

The Wattines frequently express veneration for Buffon and Carl Linnaeus. While both theories were encyclopedic in reach, Buffon saw his natural history grounded in the repeated observation of concrete material relations between beings,³⁸ through which he thought he could access a ‘physical truth.’³⁹ Linnaeus, on the other hand, “assumed an analogy between logical and natural forms. The concepts of order that under-girded eighteenth-century natural sciences mirrored the assumed order of nature: fixed, discrete and unchanging.”⁴⁰ La Roche pays little attention to Buffon’s famous hostility towards Linnaeus’s inflexible *systema naturae* but works with ideas from both theories.⁴¹

³⁴Becker-Cantarino, *Meine Liebe*, 153.

³⁵Sophie La Roche, *Briefe an Lina als Mutter: Ein Buch für junge Frauenzimmer die ihr Herz und ihren Verstand bilden wollen*, vol. 3 (Leipzig: Heinrich Graeff, 1797), 3. Emphasis by La Roche.

³⁶Grimms Wörterbuch defines Nebengeschöpf as “mitgeschöpf, mitmensch,” in: *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm* (=DWB) (First edition: 1854–1961), digital version accessed 4 November 2020.

³⁷Cf. Sophie La Roche, *Briefe an Lina als Mutter: Ein Buch für junge Frauenzimmer die ihr Herz und ihren Verstand bilden wollen*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Heinrich Graeff, 1795), VIII.

³⁸Georges-Louis Leclerc Buffon, *Histoire naturelle générale et particulière: Théorie de la terre; histoire naturelle de l’homme; animaux quadrupèdes*, vol. 1, (Paris: L’Imprimerie Royale, 1749), 55.

³⁹Phillip R. Sloan, “Natural History,” *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, vol. 2, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 903–938, 918–924.

⁴⁰Chad Wellmon, “Goethe’s Morphology of Knowledge, or the Overgrowth of Nomenclature,” *Goethe Yearbook* 17 (2010): 153–177, 161.

⁴¹For Linnaeus’s specific ecology, beyond his taxonomy, cf. Heinrich Detering, *Menschen im Weltgarten: Die Entdeckung der Ökologie in der Literatur von Haller bis Humboldt*, (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2020), 89–123.

The narrator details the complex ‘economy’ of nature and one of his thoughts – on iron as an interacting part of a whole – is later taken up by Carl. The narrator describes his own heightened enthusiasm for the world of plants in view of the fact that their beautiful green color stems from iron particles in the ground. He takes joy in the idea that his favorite metal, which he tenderly calls his ‘darling’ (EO, 22), is not only useful but adds to the aesthetically pleasing splendor of nature. When Carl later resumes this train of thought, he breaks down the idea of an *oeconomia naturae* to “große[] und kleine[] Zirkel”:

darf ich die Idee mittheilen, daß ich hier an die großen und kleinen Zirkel denke, welche beseelte und unbeseelte Wesen dieser Erde, von Anfang ihres Entstehens, bis zu ihrem Ende neben einander durchlaufen. [...] Eisentheilchen verbanden sich in dem Innern der Erde zu Erz, dieses wurde ausgegraben, geschmolzen und zu Drath verarbeitet, [...] endlich wurde ein Theil zum Vogelbauer für meinen Carmil verbraucht, und werden wohl hier in Rosttheilchen aufgelöst, vielleicht neben der Asche meiner Kinder liegen, mit dem Ganzen vereint werden, damit die ersten wieder neue Eisenerze, die andre aber Pflanzen nähren, welche zum Dienst des Lebens nachfolgender Menschengeschlechter berufen seyn mögen. (EO, 354–55)

In this material-semiotic reading, the social and ‘natural’ worlds interrelate: by leveling the difference between objects, persons, and ideas and, more importantly, by emphasizing the transience and constant repetition of these interactions, Carl incorporates these “große[] und kleine[] Zirkel” (EO, 354) in an overarching, all-encompassing natural cycle of life. In this rather disconcerting image, human exceptionalism is suspended for the individuals who vanish indistinguishably into ‘nature.’ At the same time, at least in Carl’s thoughts, a special role is culturally reinstated for humanity, since the final purpose of the iron ore consists of serving future human generations. In yet another variation on the idea, the narrator yearns to harvest a flower from the grave of a close friend in order to feel a direct, physical connection to the deceased (EO, 163–64). In a more reciprocal take on these natural cycles, the Wattines understand their future gravesite as a “Dankopfer”: if they were to be buried on the island, the insular flora would enjoy “einen stärkern und schönern Wuchs” “durch die aufgelösten Theile unsers Wesens” (EO, 160).

While the observable repetition of processes seems to reference Buffon’s ‘physical truth,’ La Roche shares the fundamental conviction that the divine order manifests itself in nature with Linnaeus.⁴² Along these lines the focus swiftly shifts from sky to heaven, when Carl explains the stars to Emilie:

Er küßte meine Stirne und sagte lächelnd: Du hast recht, meine Emilie! diese Sterne als liebeiche Nachbarn anzusehen [...]. Die Luft war so ruhig, daß wir den Widerschein der Gestirne auf der glatten Oberfläche des Wassers sahen. Wattines [...] sagte: Theure

⁴²Linnaeus’s physicotheology is tied to the notion of harmony which also features prominently in La Roche’s novel. Human transgression, Linnaeus held, could easily destabilize natural harmony: “Das Gleichgewicht, in dem sich die Welt befindet, die gerechte Proportion, der alle ihre Bewohner unterliegen, sind von Linnaeus nicht statisch konzipiert worden. [...] Wenn eine Species daher ihren angestammten ökologischen Ort verläßt, um eine andere anzugreifen und ihrer Nahrung zu berauben, trägt sie Konfusion in die Ordnung der Dinge.” (Wolf Lepenies, “Eine Moral aus irdischer Ordnungsiebe: Linnés Nemesis Divina,” *Carl von Linnaeus: Nemesis Divina*, ed. Wolf Lepenies and Lars Gustafsson (Munich-Vienna, Cari Hauser Verlag, 1981), 321–358, 336.) For Linnaeus, natural ecology and moral economy are therefore connected (Wolf Lepenies, “Linnaeus’s Nemesis divina and the Concept of Divine Retaliation,” *Isis*, no. 73 (1982): 11–27, 16) – an idea La Roche promotes and develops in her novel as well, as I will show later.

Emilie! sind wir nicht in diesem Moment zwischen zwey Himmel? [...]: *hier bey dem nahen Ebenbilde des Himmels über uns, bist du mein Engel, der sanfte Tugend und Vorschmack der Seligkeit in meine Seele gießt.* [...] Der Anblick dieser zahllosen Welten über uns, und das Gefühl unserer moralischen Verbindung mit ihrem und unserm Schöpfer, erhebt meine Seele über alles Wohl und Weh unserer Erde. Diese Gestirne und Gott über uns, *du*, deine Liebe für mich und unsere auf dieser Insel ausübende Tugend, erfüllen alle meine Gedanken. –” (EO, 129, my emphasis)

God as the common creator of nature and humanity provides an important link for the twofold mirroring process that underpins Carl’s thoughts here: the physical reflection of the sky in the lake also – figuratively – refers to heaven, thus alluding to natural theology (*Physikotheologie*). All three layers, the human social world, ‘nature,’ and God, are monistically folded into one moral community, an intricately layered, both transcendental and physical network. In this sense, the novel alludes to wild forests but cannot imagine wilderness as a fully a-cultural and unpredictable phenomenon or as a threat or place of exile (even though technically, it is exactly that for the Wattines as survivors of the French Revolution). As Emilie states on another occasion with regard to the island: “Es ist ja auch unsers Gottes Erde, wie die Gegenden, wo wir bisher lebten.” (EO, 95) The pre-established order which connects human and non-human natures is extensive and inclusive, thus challenging any stark opposition between nature and culture. Stars and humans appear as neighbors, associates, even companions who are not only part of the same material bio-cycles or networks, but also committed to a relationship of mutual respect and consideration. Ecological interactions are explicitly transformed into moral communities, permeated by God. In this sense, the Wattines are bound to defy the primacy of use-value: “Er ist mir so werth, der Boden der mich aufnahm, sagte [...] Carl], daß ich ihn nicht aus den Augen verlieren möchte.” (EO, 72) The subject-object structure is reset in terms of agency with the island assuming the active role: hierarchies prove to be transcended in the emotional bond between person and place.

Throughout the novel, Carl Wattines suggests that human and extra-human natures engage in comparable acts of communication through which they absorb, process, and relay information.⁴³ In keeping with an empiricist tradition, Carl holds “*alle unsere Ideen und Kenntnisse erhält unser Geist durch die Sinne: also durch sinnliche irdische Hülfsmittel, des Fühlens und Sehens*” (EO, 326–27, emphasis in the original). He offers a surprising analogy:

wie Bäume, welche nach dem Gesetze der Natur aus der Erde stammen, von ihr festgehalten und ernährt werden, die Kraft des Erhebens und Ausbreitens durch sie bekommen, durch die Wurzeln unaufhörlich Säfte und Kräfte sammeln, und diese in dem freien Luftraum in Aesten, Zweigen, Blättern und Früchten, in tausendfacher Richtung und Biegungen zeigen, weil sie in der Luft sich frey und willkürlich ausbreiten können, ihre Bewegung aber nur durch zufällige, schwache oder starke Erschütterung erhalten. (EO, 327)

⁴³Carl draws on a specific monistic sensualism here that is also indicative of Herder. Cf. Marion Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus: Untersuchungen zur Erkenntnistheorie und Metaphysik des jungen Herder (1763–1778)* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1994), 13–31.

He then returns to the human world:

Ist es, dachte ich, nach dem Grundsatz der Gelehrten und dem Stammbaume der Wissenschaften nicht eben so? [...] Erheben und verbreiten sich die Ideen der Menschen nicht in dem unermeßlichen Spielraume der moralischen Welt des Denkens, bald in mächtigen fruchtbaren Aesten großer und nützlicher Wissenschaften, bald in tausend größern und kleinern Zweigen der Dichtkunst, wohl auch in Tändelei und Phantasien? Sind die Werke des Geistes nicht auch zufälligen Meinungen, oder Erschütterung fremder Gewalt unterworfen? (EO, 327)

The notion that the sciences are fully reliant on the senses through which they first come into being is tied to a sweeping concession of agency: when Carl emphasizes that twigs and branches can spread out freely and “willkürlich” (EO, 327) in the air, he attributes willpower to the tree.⁴⁴

The whole human system of morality, knowledge, and art is then described as an organism rooted in and nourished by the soil of Earth, thus inextricably connected to material processes. The collective organism of trees not only serves as the perfect simile of human culture but is in fact, through the senses, materially linked to it. This particular interconnection of human and extra-human natures, not only by analogy but also by homology (quite literally by common ground), insinuates an inherent expressivity of non-human nature. In this sense, material ecocritics have long stressed the omnipresence of semiotic processes. Jesper Hoffmeyer understands “sentience as a unitary phenomenon. There are many kinds of sentience, and our own human kind of human sentience is just one example in a multigraded series.”⁴⁵ When Carl Wattines considers Native American philosophy and religion, he is therefore appreciative of the underlying ‘truthfulness’ of their animism.⁴⁶ The Native Americans – Carl is told at one point – “glauben an ein mächtiges oberstes Wesen, von welchem alles da ist, das in dem Aufgange der Sonne wohnt, und zu welchem alle gute Menschen kommen. Die Gewitter halten sie für Kennzeichen seines Zorns, machen dann Gelübde und bieten alles zum Opfer an, was sie besitzen: die Stille und Sonnenblicke nach einem Sturme, ist ihnen Beweiß der Versöhnung und Güte, Tanz und Gesang der Ausdruck ihres Danks.” (EO, 222) The compelling communicative interconnectedness between creator, human, nature, and morality resonates with Carl, who perceives this form of religion as simple, yet pure: “ich [...] hörte bey dieser Gelegenheit das ganz einfache, und in Wahrheit eben so reine Ideengemälde ihrer Religion.” (EO, 222) The affective bond between humans and nature rests on this notion of an ethically charged sentience, expressivity, and communication.

The impact of people on nature

While the novel attends to the automatic processes and extant organic networks of (human and extra-human) nature, it also suggests that ‘historical’ changes can occur

⁴⁴Grimms Wörterbuch sees “die grundbedeutung” of “Willkür” as “freie wahl oder entschlieszung”, in: *DWB*, accessed 4 November 2020.

⁴⁵Jesper Hoffmeyer, “Semiotic Scaffolding: A Unitary Principle Gluing Life and Culture Together,” *Green Letters* 19, no. 3 (2015): 243–254, 249. Cf. also Kate Rigby, “Earth’s poesy: Romantic poetics, natural philosophy, and biosemiotics,” *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, ed. Hubert Zapf (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 45–64. Cf. also Rigby, “Art, nature, and the poesy of plants in the Goethezeit: a biosemiotic perspective,” *Goethe Yearbook* 22, no. 1 (2015): 23–44. And finally, cf. the long-established trope of the legibility of nature, for example in Hans Blumenberg, *Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), 162–232.

⁴⁶Cf. Joni Adamson on animism and multispecies ethnography in: “Sources of Life: Avatar, Amazonia, and an Ecology of Selves,” in *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. Serenella Iovino, Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 253–268.

within them. The impact people have on the environment is, conversely, just as central for La Roche. Amongst others, Buffon advocated a comprehensive tampering with the regional environment in order to adjust the climate and ‘set’ the temperature.⁴⁷ This assumption was in keeping with the dominant climate paradigm which emphasized an important link between climate and biopolitics.⁴⁸ In this context, Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre proves of importance for La Roche’s novel. While Bernardin’s *Paul et Virginie* is not explicitly mentioned, many parallels to his bestselling novel can be found in *Erscheinungen*.⁴⁹ In *Paul et Virginie*, Bernardin juxtaposes corrupt French culture and the harmonious, if modest life on Mauritius (under French colonial rule), tying these subliminal analyses to the foregrounded, tragic love-story: the female protagonist Virginie drowns on her way back from Europe, unwilling to remove her clothes when her ship encounters a dramatic storm near the shores of Mauritius, readying herself for heaven instead. Her specific modesty is contrasted with Emilie’s pragmatic behavior, when she decides to swim across the lake and ask the Oneida, her neighbors, for help when she is about to give birth.⁵⁰

Apart from this inverted plot reference, the specific environmentalism in Bernardin’s novel resonates with similar reflections in La Roche’s novel. *Paul et Virginie* celebrates the proximity of people and nature and presents Mauritius as an innocent earthly paradise which has been upset by the abuse of power, greed, and colonial exploitation.⁵¹ By contrast, Bernardin emphasizes the harmony in places “where plants, animals, and minerals happily coexisted in symbiosis”;⁵² any well-founded and prescient human intervention in these natural equilibria would have to be, first and foremost, based on a thorough comprehension of the interdependent natural networks. With that said, Pacini links the tropical storm in the course of which Virginie dies to the microclimatic shifts caused by the exploitative, colonial interference with nature: “the storms and hurricanes that strike Paul and Virginie’s fictional colony [...] were also literal references to the destructive consequences of deforestation practices on the island of Mauritius.”⁵³

Bernardin’s natural philosophy remains central for La Roche’s novel: “Nun bat ich um das Vorlesen einiger Blätter im *Bernardin de St. Pierre*, welchen Wattines besonders liebt, und dessen Art die Natur zu betrachten, unserer Lage und unsern Gefühlen nah und sympathetisch war” (EO, 339, emphasis in the original). However, La Roche shifts the emphasis from the emerging problems of extractivism to nature’s inherent harmonies.⁵⁴ This edifying (rather than cautionary) focus on harmony accounts for the salient plot inversions in La Roche’s novel: while Virginie drowns, weighed down by clothes

⁴⁷Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, *Epoques de la nature*, in *Histoire naturelle, générale, et particulière*, vol. 5 (Paris: L’Imprimerie Royale, 1778), 244.

⁴⁸Fabien Locher, Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, “Modernity’s Frail Climate: A Climate History of Environmental Reflexivity,” *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 3 (2012): 579–598, 581.

⁴⁹Linda Dietrick, “Schwimme mit mir hinüber zu den Hütten unserer Nachbarn’: Colonial Islands in Sophie von La Roche’s *Erscheinungen am See Oneida* (1798) and Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s *Paul et Virginie* (1788),” in *Sophie Discovers Amerika: German-Speaking Women Write the New World*, ed. Rob McFarland, Michelle Stott James (London: Camden House, 2014), 16–29.

⁵⁰Dietrick sees La Roche’s adaptation as a practical readjustment. Dietrick, “Schwimme mit mir,” 20. The social transaction between equals is, however, more complex in the novel, cf. the following.

⁵¹Cf. Giulia Pacini, “*Paul et Virginie*. Environmental Concerns in Bernardin de Saint Pierre’s *Paul et Virginie*,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 18, no. 1 (2011): 87–103, 91–92.

⁵²Cf. Pacini, “*Paul et Virginie*,” 93.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁴She discusses these issues predominantly with regard to the colonization of South America.

which hamper her ability to swim, Emilie swims in order to give birth. Whereas Paul and Virginie tragically die, the Wattines live happily ever after. Against the intertextual background it becomes evident that the Wattines succeed because they emulate Paul and Virginie's instinctive consonance with nature under more fortunate circumstances: they intellectually understand and embrace the moral implication of the natural harmonies of which they acknowledge themselves to be a part.

Using 'nature' vs. reciprocity

At the same time, their knowledge-driven approach is still mainly borne by a conventional set of paradigms which map out the proper use of the earth; in this sense fruit-bearing trees surpass regular trees (EO, 326) as much as livestock outranks wild animals in terms of utility (EO, 25). The analysis of the 'Indianer' whose culture allegedly 'lags behind' is particularly instructive in this context, as Carl points out:

Ich wünschte mir nicht die Zufriedenheit meiner Indier, freute mich für sie, daß sie es sind, weil ich nichts für sie thun kann, aber ich hoffe doch, daß der allmähliche Umlauf der Kenntnisse und Wissenschaften, auch für *sie* ein edleres Glück hervorbringen wird: aber wie lange mag es noch dauern, bis diese Völkerschaften einmal ihre Kinder die ganze Würde der Menschheit lehren, und ihnen sagen werden: was für große und glückliche Vorzüge hat der Mensch durch die Gestalt und Fähigkeiten seines Körpers! wie viel mehr aber durch seine Vernunft, vor allen andern Wesen. (EO, 242, emphasis in the original)

During the entire time the Wattines spend with the Oneida tribe, they dither between gratitude, recognition, respect, and a specific form of – subtly and openly degrading – dismissal:⁵⁵ even though the humanity⁵⁶ and integrity of individual Oneida are beyond dispute, their overall 'backward' (if morally pure) state occasionally disconcerts the protagonists. While the ingenuity of the human body and, more importantly, reason are shared by all peoples without exception, humanity's inherent potential unfolds in a gradual, Herderian manner.⁵⁷ Humans reach their apex in discovering, grasping (in the literal and figurative sense), owning, appropriating ("steht ihm [...] zu Gebot", EO, 243), ruling and conquering ("das Meer selbst muß sich seiner Herrschaft unterwerfen", EO, 244) the world. Indeed, the specific relation between knowledge and nature is key here and corroborates a notion of ownership which installs 'nature' as an object whose refinement depends on human interference – as much as human refinement is relative to heightened intellectual awareness and virtue:

dem Wasser setzt er Gränzen durch Erddämme. Er baut Brücken über die Flüsse, und verbindet sie durch Canäle, leitet den Blitz ab [...]. Er hat durch sorgsame Pflege alle Getraidearten, Blumen und Früchte veredelt. – *Ach, wie lange mag es noch dauern, bis alle Gegenden der Erde zu dem seligen Genuß dieser Kenntnisse und dieser Betrachtungen gelangt seyn werden?* (EO, 244, my emphasis)

⁵⁵Cf. Elisabeth Krimmer, "A Garden of Her Own: Noble Savages and Superior Europeans in Sophie von La Roche's *Erscheinungen am See Oneida*," in *Harmony in Discord: German Women Writers in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Laura Martin (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002) 21–43.

⁵⁶"Die Natur machte keinen so großen Unterschied in der ursprünglichen Anlage, nur das Verhängniß schafft Aenderung, durch die Verschiedenheit der Umstände. Der nackte, arme, rohe Mensch, hat alle Leidenschaften des gebildeten. –". (EO, 308)

⁵⁷Benedikt Stuchtey, *Die europäische Expansion und ihre Feinde: Kolonialismuskritik vom 18. bis ins 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2010), 81–87. Susanne Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770–1870* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 74–76.

This sharply defined hierarchy is complicated, but not rejected, by the more holistic and symbiotic understanding of nature as an interlocking whole which ties together the human and the extra-human spheres in a well-ordered cosmos. In this sense, La Roche also employs a long-established metaphor which gained new purchase in the eighteenth century (prominently, for example, in poems by Friedrich Gottlob Klopstock and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe): the notion of ‘Mother Nature’⁵⁸ provides a template for a specific technique of personification and anthropomorphization which the novel puts to use in several episodes: “unsere Leiden und Freuden der Sinne kamen aus der Hand der Natur, und je länger wir auf unserer Insel unter ihrer Aufsicht und Pflege waren, desto mehr fühlten wir, *daß sie sich gegen gute, ihr immer nahen Kinder wahrhaft mütterlich zeigt*; denn unsere Gesundheit und unsere Kräfte vermehrten sich, nie hinderte Unverdaulichkeit unsern Schlaf, nie plagte uns Langeweile.” (EO, 175, my emphasis)

After extracting honey from a tree, Emilie, for example, spends some time decorating the latter with a flower wreath; Carl is delighted: “Diese liebliche Idee entzückte ihn, weil sie ihm Emiliens heitre Zufriedenheit anzeigte, indem sie ihm zugleich sagte: ich konnte der guten Dryade, welche den Honig so wohl verwahrte, meinen Dank auf keine andre Art beweisen.” (EO, 119–20)

In his article on forests⁵⁹ in Denis Diderot’s and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*, one of the canonical *oeuvres* the Wattines hold dear, Jean-Baptiste Le Roy proposes two “fundamentally opposed concepts of the forest. One is the concept of the forest as resource; the other of the forest as sanctuary.”⁶⁰ This modern reduction of the forest to a mere material resource “in need of management”⁶¹ obliterates the forest as habitat.⁶² While on the one hand, the Wattines firmly believe in the specific type of knowledge which helps unlock and manage natural resources, this particular example shows how the novel attempts to reconcile competing interpretations of nature: “Our oaks no longer offer oracles, and we no longer ask of them the sacred mistletoe” (p. 129), it reads in the *Encyclopédie*. Emilie, by contrast, re-sacralizes the honey tree (from which they rather mundanely harvest honey rather than sacred mistletoe) when she decorates it with flowers as a token of gratitude toward the ‘dryad,’ the ‘spirit’ inhabiting the tree.⁶³ In La Roche’s interpretation, utility (which is crucial in the text) and veneration no longer appear mutually exclusive here: the so-called ‘mastery of nature’ can only occur in unison with it.

The most famous dryad is arguably Daphne, who also features prominently in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In Ovid’s narrative poem, Daphne pleads with the river god Peneus and is transformed into the laurel her name already signifies, thus escaping the besotted Apollo. However, in a gender-theoretically noteworthy twist, Apollo still asserts his claim over her body by appropriating the parts of the tree that are useful to him, wood

⁵⁸For more on the broader, feminist context of this metaphor cf. Stacy Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 2–3.

⁵⁹Jean-Baptiste Le Roy, “Forêt,” *L’Encyclopédie* vol. 7 (1757), 129–133, 129.

⁶⁰Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 123.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 120.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 121.

⁶³Falling back on the polytheistic Greek pantheon, she thanks the dryad, a tree nymph who belongs to the minor divinities that “das lebendige weben und schaffen der kräfte der natur in allen kreisen derselben als persönliche wesen repräsentierten.” Grimms Wörterbuch; Nympe, in: DWB, accessed 4 November 2020. Cf. also Carl’s more ambiguous thoughts on dryads later in the text (EO, 365–66).

for his lyre and quivers, laurel to crown his head with. In this context, Emilie's curious behavior toward the tree indicates that she does not take the honey it bestows for granted but, by offering flowers in return, symbolically attempts to offset hierarchies of exploitation and appropriation. Cartesian rationalism and the empiricism of the *Encyclopédie*, both of which sought to attain mastery over and possession of nature, are subliminally called into doubt and replaced by a more nuanced form of interspecies recognition: the nature-human relationship is personalized, regulated and determined by a sense of mutual appreciation in which 'nature' and God act as surrogates for society:

Emilie! wie ungerecht war ich gegen diese Blumen und dich. Ihr verblüht beyde ungesehen und unbekannt in dieser Einsamkeit. – [...] sie erwiederte: Mein Carl! wie kannst du dieses sagen, da Gott, du und die Sonne uns sehen, und Bienen die Blumen besuchen, indem sie dadurch von deiner Hand ein neues Gastmahl genießen, wie ich, daß die Gestalt deiner Emilie deinem Auge so werth ist. (EO, 149)

The overlapping circles of recognition are conspicuously intersected with the material economy of 'nature': the appreciation of the flowers falls to the bees, which in return produce honey as a *quid pro quo*, a physical equivalency.

By tying together notions of interdependency, inclusivity, and monism as well as concepts of reciprocity and mutuality together, the novel complicates the concept of ownership: people and nature are entangled in concrete and individualized interactions and communications which undercut the notion of abstract and all-encompassing property rules devised as the unilateral exertion of governance and control over resources. These shifts place pressure on the hierarchical relationality of ownership: the right to use, enjoy, and benefit from nature and its products does not automatically include the right to exploit, subjugate, or destroy it. In civil law, however, the right to consume, transfer, and destroy property (*abusus*) presents the third pillar of *full* ownership – next to *usus* (using a thing without altering it) and *fructus* (profiting from a thing possessed).⁶⁴ Within such intricate networks, notions of owning and using are subject to ethical limits. The stable demarcation on which (land) ownership legally rests becomes increasingly diffuse in view of La Roche's approach to nature.⁶⁵ At this juncture, she finds herself in close alignment with the natural law philosopher Christian Wolff, who positioned himself on similar "Verbindlichkeiten" in the following way: "folglich schließt das Eigenthumsrecht nicht das Recht in sich, seine Sache zu verderben, oder zu verschlimmern (§. 49.)."⁶⁶ While Wolff arrives at this conclusion by logically deducing it from the duty of self-preservation,⁶⁷ La Roche suggests a different and highly innovative

⁶⁴Yael Emerich, *Conceptualising Property Law: Integrating Common Law and Civil Law Traditions* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018), 93–96. Cf. the importance and prominence of Roman law at the turn of eighteenth century in France: Shael Herman, "The Uses and Abuses of Roman Law Texts," *The American Journal of Comparative Law* 29. 4 (1981): 671–690.

⁶⁵The novel explicitly reaffirms the "englischen Grundgesetze [...]": Freyheit zu lassen, mit sich und *seinem Eigenthume zu thun was man will*" (my emphasis), however, with a significant limitation: "nur nichts gegen das gemeine Beste und gegen andre." (EO, 362). While Carl "soll bey der Uebergabe der Insel, der Freyheit versichert werden, mit ihr zu thun was er will. –" (EO, 414), he is naturally limited and guided by his complex ethos toward nature.

⁶⁶Christian Wolff, *Grundsätze des Natur- und Völkerrechts*, worinn alle Verbindlichkeiten und alle Rechte aus der Natur des Menschen in einem beständigen Zusammenhange hergeleitet werden (Halle, 1754), S. 157.

⁶⁷"Das Vermögen eines Menschen gehört zu seinem äußerlichen Zustande (§. 8. 207.). Derowegen da wir schuldig sind unsern äußeren Zustand so vollkommen zu machen, als in unserer Gewalt stehet (§. 43.); so sind wir verbunden unser Vermögen zu erhalten und, so viel an uns ist, zu vermehren." Wolff, *Grundsätze des Natur- und Völkerrechts*, 132.

justification for the proposed ethical limitations with her notion of reciprocity in natural networks.

Conclusions: Property between culturalization strategies and deep ecology

Based on these reflections, La Roche emphasizes that property is not just an extension of the subject (as suggested in Locke's workmanship model); instead, she highlights the relationality of the structure that sustains 'property,' anticipating aspects in current spatio-legal ideas which describe 'belonging' not only as a subject-object relation, in which an object, space, or rights over it belong to a subject, but rather as a form of embeddedness in which belonging is based on the complex connections between the part and the whole.⁶⁸ Property in this context proves to be dependent on the surrounding networks that support it.

With a clear focus on such legal and extra-legal networks of 'ownership,' the layered ambiguity of La Roche's argument comes to the fore: while she quite radically rethinks conventional mechanisms of appropriation within spatial networks, she also draws on the religiously charged, essentialized idea of a pre-stabilized cosmic order within which moral behavior is unequivocally identifiable as 'appropriate.' On the other hand, property relations in La Roche's networks are open to constant (moral) reassessment and consequently remain in flux: with this, she also approximates spatio-legal positions which similarly highlight that the relationships of belonging between entities "are in fact not fixed but dynamic and contingent. Seemingly static entities are in fact part of a wider and constantly changing space."⁶⁹

In one of Emilie's superficially innocent comments, important intellectual threads come together and demonstrate the ambivalence of her argument: "Lieber Carl! wir sind hier wirklich in den Armen der reinen einfachen Natur, von niemand gesehen, als von unserm Urheber. Wir wollen die physischen Wunder und Güter seiner Erde ganz kennen lernen, und ihm in unsern Herzen das schönste und beste zeigen, was die moralische Welt für sein göttliches Auge haben kann." (EO, 277–78) The only adequate response to the wonders and goods ("Wunder" and "Güter," EO, 278) of nature lies in a heightened sense of morality. At the same time, Emilie omits the sphere of territory, insinuating a 'pure' and undisturbed encounter with God's divine creation. That the Oneidas live nearby – and have in fact inhabited the same island –, does not seem relevant to her.⁷⁰ On another occasion the novel explicitly addresses the former presence of the indigenous tribe. The Oneidas, however, who made use of the island in earlier times

⁶⁸Cf. for instance, Davina Cooper, "Opening up ownership: Community belonging, belongings, and the productive life of property," *Law & Social Inquiry* 32, no. 3 (2007): 625–64.

⁶⁹Sarah Keenan, "Subversive Property: Reshaping Malleable Spaces of Belonging," *Social & Legal Studies* 2010, no. 4 (2010): 423–39, 430.

⁷⁰I cannot go into more details around the Wattines's stance on the Oneidas in this article aside from the property relations in question, but much of this ground has been covered. Cf., for example, Nicole Perry, "Savagery of America? Nineteenth-century German Literature and Indigenous Representations," in *Savage Worlds: German Encounters Abroad 1798–1914*, ed. by Matthew P Fitzpatrick, Peter Monteath (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 169–184; Wynfrid Kriegleder, "The American Indian in German Novels up to the 1850s," *German Life and Letters* 53, no. 4 (2000): 487–498. The intercultural exchange, even though it leaves some room for the experience of and input from the Oneidas, remains ultimately weak. The Wattines respond with incomprehension when Nesquehiounah, a member of the Oneida tribe, once fully assimilated to the European context, decides to return to his original lifestyle. For them, he reverts to a less evolved stage and thus contradicts the moral paradigms of progress the text lays out.

failed to engage with nature in ways that the novel prescribes as proper; neither did they cultivate the earth, nor did they show any bilateral engagement with nature. Carl's thoughts on a conspicuous clearing on the island prove to be crucial: "bey dem üppigen Wuchse aller Bäume und Gesträuche der Insel [war es] nicht natürlich [...], daß die Natur eine solche große Stelle ohne große Gewächse gelassen habe; sondern er war überzeugt, daß ehemals die Indier hier Feste hielten, oder bey ihren Jagden auf der Insel öfters Feuer da hatten und Strauchwurzeln nebst Bäumen ausgerottet wurden." (EO, 101) While Carl himself extirpates (*ausrotten*) trees as a matter of course in order to create an aesthetically appealing *Nutzlandschaft*, the Oneidas merely use it for their celebrations and hunting. The latter especially incurs Emilie's displeasure, which becomes explicit when she fears that her husband – forced to socialize with the Oneidas – might turn to hunting again: "Der Indier nahm ihn ein paarmal mit auf die nahe Jagd. Ich wurde bange, es möchte diese alte Edelmannsfreude wieder in ihm erwachen, und ich liebte ihn mehr als Bauer und Gärtner, als ich ihn wie Jäger lieben würde." (EO, 239)⁷¹ Following this assessment, one can infer the inherent judgement with regard to the clearing: Carl cultivates the earth, whereas the Native Americans deplete it by hunting and celebrating. "[D]ie guten Kinder der Natur" (EO, 312; 378) – as Emilie refers to the Oneidas in a then-common turn of phrase –, are thus, ironically, further removed from nature than the highly sophisticated Wattines. With this clarification, any moral claim to the land that the "Indier" could potentially lodge falls apart and it becomes clear why the Wattines deserve to own the island from an ethical standpoint: instead of destroying (ab-using) nature, they 'culturalize' it and bring it to new heights.

Another aspect is important here: Emilie – somewhat contrary to Carl – portrays the island as a blank canvas, unpossessed, uninscribed, and unaltered by any kind of previous human interference.⁷² Moral receptiveness and moral performance are here contingent on scientific knowledge and an appropriate understanding of nature, as the Wattines amply demonstrate with their extensive knowledge and fervent appreciation of Buffon and Linnaeus amongst others. These moralized, bilateral interactions with nature, however, give rise to strategies of appropriation in the mode of an 'anti-conquest' "in which the naturalist naturalizes the bourgeois European's own global presence and authority."⁷³ Mary-Louise Pratt shows how this specific 'neutral' and scientific strategy of appropriation, which distanced itself – in an act of ostensible innocence – from the older, imperial rhetoric of conquest, simply introduced another effective mode of domination.⁷⁴

It is worth noting that the novel also emulates other seemingly non-violent patterns of conquest which can be best explained by drawing on Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions*. Greenblatt looks at processes of appropriation in relation to 'wonder.' He understands the latter as a calculated rhetorical strategy employed by Columbus, as an

⁷¹Emilie's critical comment on hunting as a form of aristocratic leisure is an interesting rhetorical twist which runs counter to her persistent longing for their European past: she employs a very specific argument which does not undermine hunting per se but rather a specific lifestyle which is not appropriate on uncultured land unless combined with culturizing activities (hence the reference to Carl as gardener or farmer). The priority for Emilie in this new context thus remains the cultivation of the land.

⁷²Cf. similarly Carl's comment: "Emilie! wie prachtvoll, stark und innig verbunden ist alles, wie es aus der Hand Gottes kam, wenn Menschen noch nichts verdorben haben!" (EO, 95)

⁷³Mary-Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 2008), 2.

⁷⁴Ibid.

“evocation of an aesthetic response in the service of a legitimation process.”⁷⁵ Columbus merges the sense of the marvelous with a legal discourse of appropriation and transforms it into an effective hybrid,⁷⁶ on the basis of which he aggressively appropriates through linguistic acts, for example through the extensive renaming of people(s) and places.⁷⁷ Although the Wattines do not take possession with ritualistic naming procedures, it is striking how their engagement with the island is similarly motivated and regulated by European ideas. Not only do the sciences come to mind here, but also other forms of classifying, naming, and interpreting. Greek antiquity, for example, provides a prominent mold in which events are interpreted and understood, which insinuates that European knowledge offers appropriate and globally applicable mechanisms for processing new experiences. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the Wattines start their new lives on the island equipped with a respectably sized library, which by their own admission proves just as useful as the tools they own (EO, 58).

While the text allows for a certain diversity⁷⁸ of opinions on European politics (EO, 38–39), the idea of (cultural) progress seems overarching and incontrovertible. The Wattines frequently establish timelines which indicate gradual improvement through sociability and learning, for example, when Carl, tellingly grasping a Buffon volume, emphasizes how he feels privileged to live in a time “welche mich fähig machte, nicht nur den großen Geist, der vor Jahrtausenden lebenden Griechen und Römer, sondern auch Englands Bacon und Newton, unsere großen Teutschen und Büffon zu kennen.” (EO, 259–60) The seemingly collective human enterprise is once again driven by a distinct set of European thinkers, writers, and values. In particular the world of science, with Linnaeus and Buffon at the forefront, holds a significant stake in this undertaking.⁷⁹

These globalizing tendencies of the ‘European project’ have an impact on how the Wattines perceive property; they also form a part of the Wattines’s ethical and historical self-understanding.⁸⁰ Carl explicitly grapples with questions of (feudal) power and ownership (EO, 75), however, the text does not contest the idea of property as such, even though Jean-Jacques Rousseau is a prominent reference point in the novel: in his *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau famously reverses fundamental premises of natural law property theory which sought to explain, naturalize, rationalize, and legitimize concepts of ownership:

The first man, who, after enclosing a piece of ground, took it into his head to say, ‘This is mine,’ and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. How many Crimes, how many Wars, how many Murders, how many Misfortunes and Horrors, would that Man have saved the Human Species, who pulling up the Stakes or filling up the Ditches should have cried to his Fellows: Be sure not to listen to this

⁷⁵Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 73–74.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 81.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 83.

⁷⁸The unfiltered enthusiasm for the aristocratic protagonists, however, conveys a distinct conservatism as well, tying in with then-current national stereotypes that the novel continuously confirms.

⁷⁹Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 28.

⁸⁰In this sense, Carl places an emphasis on enlightened European self-awareness and historicist self-reflection above the self-understanding of non-European cultures, thus fitting into what Dan Edelstein referred to as the matrix of Enlightenment. Dan Edelstein, *Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010), p. 13.

Impostor; you are lost, if you forget that the Fruits of the Earth belong equally to us all, and the Earth itself to nobody!⁸¹

Rousseau's categorical criticism of ownership goes more or less unappreciated in the novel, even though the Wattines come to reflect on it in a broader historical-philosophical context in view of the "Frühling der Welt und die guten Kinder der Natur [...], wo Gesetze und Ordnung noch keine Stufenfolge unter den Menschen gemacht, und den bösen niedern Neid noch nicht geweckt hatten." (EO, 312) By alluding to the 'dawn of humanity,' these thoughts echo important elements of Rousseau's 'state of nature,' which precedes any distinctions imposed by law and order. Property is not mentioned here, but the newly created hierarchy ("Stufenfolge," EO, 312) implies exactly the form of inequality that Rousseau associates with ownership. At the same time, when the Wattines deliberate over their unaccustomed destitution on the island, wondering how their former tenants in France might have felt in view of their erstwhile wealth, Emilie concludes "daß die Pächter meiner Eltern oft mit eben der Ergebung, welche wir jetzo übten, unsere Wohnung, Speisen und Geräthe, als *nach Gottes Willen verordnete Verschiedenheit* angesehen hätten" (EO, 111, my emphasis).

Between natural law property theory and Rousseau's concerns about inequality, the Wattines suggest a third way by proposing an ethicized take on ownership which is chiefly driven by cooperative, consensual, moral considerations. Simultaneously, they advocate the *progressive* culturalization of the earth as the only suitable form of appropriation (improving 'nature' through agriculture, gardening etc.).⁸² The main direction of their argument in this sense still corresponds with the globalizing and totalizing tendencies of their time. In fact, they allow for the protection and preservation of a *status quo* in Europe (in particular against the French Revolution, which stripped the Wattines of the wealth and rank), while allowing for systematic (re)appropriation in the 'New World.'

Nevertheless, La Roche upsets conventional concepts of ownership: her deliberations on 'nature' have an impact not only on what can be owned but also on how it ought to be owned: the novel pays close attention to the complex temporal and spatial patterns connecting and structuring different networks which interlace in one concrete place. While maps and contracts are crucial and universally accepted in the novel (even by the Native Americans), the Wattines see their land as part of a specific, constantly changing environment, an ecosystem which does not coincide with the property they eventually own but extends and connects to networks beyond its confines. By drawing attention to these processes and interconnections, the novel reinserts the important notion of place in the notion of property. With their attachment to a specific place and their attentive engagement with local material contexts, the Wattines come close to a precursory form of 'worlding': they blend the material and the semiotic as well as blur the lines between the subject and its environment. In so doing, ownership in La Roche defies "globalization's homogenizing, one-becoming pulsion" and challenges it "by an

⁸¹Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse Upon the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality among Mankind* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1761), 97.

⁸²Interestingly, this runs directly counter to more current re-evaluations of 'progress traps,' such as Yuval Noah Harari's famously critical analysis: "The Agricultural Revolution was History's Biggest Fraud." In: *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, (London: Harvill Secker, 2011), 79.

ethicization of the ecumenic process of coming together or ‘worlding.’”⁸³ In *Erscheinungen*, the planet comes to the fore as the object of natural history and taxonomy, but also as a living organism of whose ecology, so the novel suggests, human beings partake. Correspondingly, the novel follows various conversations in which the interlocutors share their insights and life stories. The notion of interaction and dialogue is hence also performatively and aesthetically implemented. This prism of diverse, intercultural opinions and experiences (including the stories of slaves and Native Americans) reflects the complicated relations in an increasingly globalized world and functions as a mode of justification that is in itself double-edged: while the text indirectly posits the need for the validation and rationalization of property in view of a complex and interactive environment, it also enshrines ownership as a culturally advanced core principle of an ethically led life.

Notes on contributor

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⁸³Elias, Moraru, “Introduction,” xi–xii.