

## Project Description

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My book investigates the history and function of sustainability in German literature from the early eighteenth to the early twentieth century. I argue that literary form can tell us much about the temporal implications of sustainability, and also that sustainability affects how literary texts tell their story: literary form reflects the temporal challenge of sustainability by performing it as well as by depicting it. In readings that focus on Albrecht Haller, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Adalbert Stifter, Alfred Döblin, and Walter Benjamin, I analyze the relation of literary form, conceptualizations of the future, and the sustainable management of natural resources.

Injecting “foreign” texts into the primarily Anglo-American discourse of ecocriticism enables me to revise conclusions about sustainability based solely on English-language sources. Since the English term “sustainability” gains traction only in the 1990’s (Cronon), several Anglophone ecocritics and ecologists attribute the widespread references to sustainability in our socio-political discourse to greenwashing. My analysis of the linguistic history of the German term *Nachhaltigkeit* (sustainability), which dates back to 1713, reveals that *Nachhaltigkeit* in fact already began seeping into a variety of discourses at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Sources from that time speak, for example, of the sustainability of libraries, finances, knowledge, and human bodies. This suggests that the presentist allusion to greenwashing doesn’t fully account for the ubiquity of the term “sustainability,” and that a more historical explanation is required.

I propose that the reason for the semantic proliferation of sustainability lies in its ability to absorb and negotiate the psychological challenges posed by radically new outlooks on the future that emerge in the 200 years covered by my study: in the first half of the eighteenth century, during the years of the ancient régime’s stability, sustainability functions like a “secularized form of eternity” (Radkau); after the French Revolution, it has to account for an unpredictably “open future” that can’t be forecast based on the present (Koselleck); and with the onset of the second industrial revolution in the 1890’s, sustainability needs to respond to the increasing awareness that a return to the past has become impossible because “the future has already begun” (Hölscher).