

Pieck, S.K.: Mnemonic Ecologies: Memory and Nature Conservation along the Former Iron Curtain. Cambridge, Massachusetts – London, England, The MIT Press, 2023. 280 p.

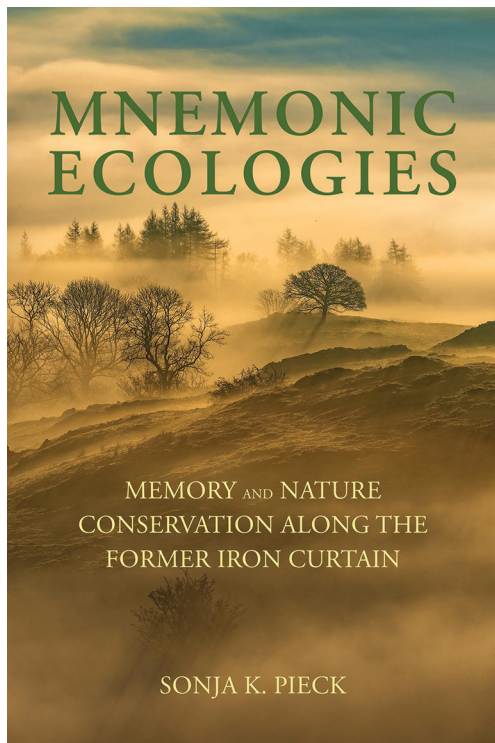
The question of the entanglement between nature and memory is of crucial importance for post-humanist thought and inclusive humanities in the age of the Anthropocene. While discussions surrounding conservation and ecological restoration are vibrant, the challenge of how to care for ecologically significant spaces marked by historical events is less common and difficult to address. The book *Mnemonic Ecologies: Memory and Nature Conservation Along the Former Iron Curtain* offers a thorough and in-depth reflection on how to sustain ecosystems while respecting the need to memorialize difficult pasts associated with specific, historically shaped spaces.

The author of the book, Sonja K. PIECK, is a human geographer of German origin, who currently works at Bates College (USA). She earned her Ph.D. from Clark University (USA). Her research focuses primarily on environmental protection and its institutional shaping, ecosystem governance, the mutual influence of nature and history, and the meanings attributed to ecological entities by people in different cultural contexts.

Above mentioned fields of her research are all addressed in *Mnemonic Ecologies*. PIECK's book comprises six chapters, along with an introduction and a conclusion. The first chapter offers a theoretical exploration of the concept of mnemonic ecologies, while the second focuses on the historical development of the Green Belt project in Germany. The subsequent three chapters address various aspects related to the existence of the Green Belt, including commemoration, politics, environmental management, and artistic initiatives. The sixth chapter provides an overview of diverse locations worldwide where the concept of mnemonic ecologies, as developed in Germany, could serve as a valuable source of inspiration.

The book explores the remarkable Green Belt project in Germany, a space that emerged from the division of the country during the Cold War. The Green Belt consists of the former border that not only separated East and West Germany but also symbolized the divide between the opposing sides of the Cold War, the so-called Iron Curtain, which, as Churchill famously stated in his Fulton speech, had "descended across the Continent." The Green Belt project stretches from Thuringia to the Baltic Sea, covering an area of 17,712 hectares and extending nearly 1400 kilometres. Following the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the reunification of Germany, this former border was gradually dismantled, leaving behind material remnants that have since fallen into decay. It was soon observed that within this artificially created space, many species of plants and animals, particularly birds, that had become rare elsewhere, were thriving. The former border had provided them with a safe refuge. This observation led to the recognition of the need to manage this "no man's land," sparking a long-lasting debate among conservationist and environmentalist, about how to sustain this socioecological hybrid. However, the discussion could not be limited to the natural features of the belt. It also had to address the social dimension of the border's difficult history. This included the trauma of the displacement of people who lived in this area before the border was established, as entire villages were destroyed to create the militarized zone. There was also the trauma associated with the attempts to cross the border, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of people trying to escape the German Democratic Republic. Therefore, the uniqueness of this space lies not only in its distinctive ecology but also in its historical significance and the ways in which the past of the former border is remembered.

In the book, PIECK raises crucial questions about how to integrate ecological perspectives with historical ones. The first chapter focuses on conceptualizing mnemonic ecologies, a term used to describe the



“complex and mutual entanglements of emerging ecosystems and historical memory” (p. 9). This refers to a layered landscape shaped both by human activity and the agency of non-humans, which find ways to interact with artificially created spaces that have passed the point of no return to their former state. Such spaces are referred to as *novel ecosystems*. The landscape layers are shaped by an ongoing, emotional process of ascribing meanings to places and the ways they are remembered. The book effectively demonstrates that it is impossible to focus solely on the ecological aspects of such spaces. As PIECK convincingly argues, “ecologies have pasts, and pasts are crafted through ecologies” (p. 22). In this theoretical section of the book, PIECK engages with key scholars from memory studies, including Jan and Aleida ASSMANN, Maurice HALBWACH, and Simon SCHAMA. Given PIECK’s attention to sensory and bodily engagement in the process of memorialization, it might have been valuable to include Paul CONNERTON’s *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, 1989), which naturally comes to mind when reading this work. In addition to addressing human memory, PIECK poses thought-provoking questions about the capacity of non-human entities to remember, and how their memory can shape landscapes. The non-anthropocentric perspective introduced through these questions as well as the empathy demonstrated towards human beings and inclusion of moral considerations regarding human memory, enriches the book, rendering it both poignant and profoundly compelling.

The subsequent chapters of the book explore the history of the German Cold War border and its enduring effects. A significant part of it focuses on the ecological initiatives spearheaded by scientists and activists from both sides of the former border in their efforts to manage the diverse ecosystems of the Green Belt. The main figure that is responsible for launching the Green Belt Project is BUND – the German Federation for the Environment and Nature Conservation (*Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland*). PIECK offers a detailed analysis of various approaches to ecological restoration, ranging from “passive management” (no intervention) to more active interventions aimed at countering natural processes that threaten habitats that developed as a result of the Cold War division. Additionally, she examines restoration strategies that seek to reestablish the original structure of the ecosystem, with the ultimate goal of creating self-sustaining environments within the Green Belt. PIECK highlights how these differing approaches are not only a matter of ecological debate but also deeply embedded in political discourse, shaped by both historical perceptions of the landscape and the present-day needs of communities living near the belt. With great sensitivity, she addresses the tensions between different advocacy groups, each promoting distinct visions for the future of the Green Belt.

A particularly compelling aspect of these discussions concerns the concept of *Heimat* that is discussed in the third chapter of the book. Here, the idealization of *Heimat* can be traced back to the romantic period of the 18th and 19th centuries, when the notion of homeland intertwined cultural heritage with a specific landscape, forming an essential element of identity for those inhabiting the area. As PIECK aptly observes, “the Green Belt today is a composite of old and new, a product of backward-looking nostalgia and, more recently, a range of future-oriented, scientific concerns that crystallized in the postwar decades” (p. 72). However, the idea of *Heimat* also carries the burden of its more ambiguous 20th-century appropriations, particularly in its nationalistic and Nazi connotations. Nonetheless, as PIECK explains, *Heimat* remains a deeply emotional and unavoidable element in the Green Belt’s restoration process, influencing the perspectives of individuals engaged in its outcome.

Thus, the vision for conservation, as articulated by representatives of the natural sciences, eco-activists, and regional authorities, is inextricably linked to subjective interpretations of the past, memory, and a deep attachment to place. PIECK persuasively argues that ecological projects cannot focus solely on environmental factors. They must also account for human memories, emotional ties to the landscape, and the complicated, often traumatic, history of the region. This nuanced perspective is a testament to the author’s sensitivity in handling the multifaceted subject matter of this remarkable book.

In the fourth chapter of the book, PIECK delves into various projects that engage with the historical legacy of the Green Belt. In these initiatives, nature becomes a medium for commemorating the past, what PIECK refers to as “mnemonic ecological projects.” Here, the landscape is actively shaped by human actions, such as the creation of art installations or memorials, but it is also influenced by non-human agents that co-construct this complex space. PIECK discusses notable examples – landscape art projects, such as the *Three Cross of Ifta*, *The West-East Gate*, Mario GOLDSTEIN’s book *Green Belt Adventure: 100 Days by Foot along the Former German-German Border*, and the BUND’s website, *Monumental*. In these cases, nature, memory, and history are interwoven, helping people reconcile with a difficult past. Nature, in this context, serves as both a historical marker and a healing force. Its specific ecology within the Green Belt gently reminds us of the region’s layered history through acts of commemoration and ecological distinctiveness from the surrounding areas.

A particularly compelling section of this chapter examines the role of power within conservation discourse, shedding light on *who* shapes the memory of this space and *how*. The act of ecological conservation is inexorably with the commemoration of partitioned Germany’s troubled history. As PIECK observes, “natu-

ral heritage becomes *national heritage*” (p. 118, emphasis in original). Yet, this national identity project carries two ambiguous aspects. On one hand, it recalls the traumatic past, which is essential to identity building processes. On the other, it underscores the lingering divide between Western and Eastern Germans. Two German identities not always seamlessly unified as ongoing debates about what it means to be “Ossi” and “Wessi” in Germany show. However, as PŁECK perfectly showed, ignoring the history is not the solution, because the past is present there anyway. People remember and inevitably add the historical values to this uncanny ecological phenomenon.

The fifth chapter of the book offers a powerful exploration of how non-human actors shape the Green Belt and how their forms of memory influence its ecology. This insightful section challenges the anthropocentric perspective, exposing the limits of human language, which often overlooks the non-human impact of the tragedy brought about by the border’s creation. It also reveals that conventional understanding of such notions like “cultural landscape” are no longer enough in describing the processes occurring in such a unique space. PŁECK highlights that “[e]cosystems both perform memory of human beings and have their own forms of memory” (p.122), viewing the former border as an act of violence that had impact on non-human actors, exposing them to suffering and forcing them to adapt to a new reality. The ecosystem still bears the presence of chemicals used to create the border, the destruction of certain species, and the deadly remnants of fortifications. However, some species use the opportunity to develop in this environment, embodying what PŁECK terms an “ecological legacy” that gives rise to *novel ecosystems*. But its condition today is still often sustained *against* natural succession, like in historical region of Eichsfeld (parts of Lower Saxony and Thuringia) part of the Green Belt.

The significant part of the chapter is devoted to varied managements across The Green Belt ecosystems. In some parts, like *Eichsfeld*, the ecosystem’s current state is sustained intentionally to support both needs of local people, and species that emerged because of the violent history of the border. In addition, the example of Rodach Valley, where heck cattle – a rebreed of the extinct aurochs – along with sheep and goats, show how they help to maintain open land and control natural processes. Another example demonstrated different approach. Along the Elbe river, “rewilding” efforts aim to revive an ancient ecosystem. All these “sensitive spaces,” as PŁECK calls them, are carefully designed by conservationists, yet these designs are not always controllable or predictable. Nonetheless it operates in the mnemonic dimension and needs to take into account the political, economic, and social contexts as well.

The final chapter broadens this framework to other parts of the world where the concept of *mnemonic ecol-*

ogies might apply, such as the Korean Demilitarized Zone, with additional examples like ecological restoration cases in Colombia and Cambodia. The author also examines the European Green Belt initiative, which was launched in 2004 with the aim of establishing a similar space along the former boundary between communist and non-communist states, stretching from the Balkans to Fennoscandia. While the concept of re-establishing the Green Belt within the geographical and historical context of the Iron Curtain holds potential for partial realization, other examples in this chapter should rather be treated as sources of inspiration. Examining conflicted places with traumatic histories from the perspective of the Green Belt project, may be however – as PŁECK argues – inspiring for different parts of the world.

PŁECK’s book is a remarkable demonstration of how profound analysis of a detailed case study can lead to impactful theoretical contributions. Her thorough study of the Green Belt project leads to the development of the valuable concept of mnemonic ecologies, likely to resonate in the *milieu* of scholars interested in the intersection of nature and memory. By addressing remembrance, ethics, and sensitivity to both human and non-human perspectives, this book becomes an inspiring and thought-provoking reading.

MAŁGORZATA PRACZYK¹

REFERENCES

- BUND *Monumental: Das Grüne Band auf dem Weg zum nationalen Naturmonument: Thüringen hat den Anfang gemacht*. Available at <http://www.grünes-band-monumental.de>.
- CONNERTON, P. 1989. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.
- GOLDSTEIN, M. 2019. *Abenteuer Grünes Band: 100 Tage zu Fuss entlang der ehemaligen deutsch-deutschen Grenze*. Munich, Knesebeck.

¹Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland.
E-mail: malgorzata.praczyk@amu.edu.pl