

*Call for Papers*

**The ‘Ordinary Magic’ of Resilience in Anglophone Literatures:  
Past, Present, Futures**

**22-23 February 2024  
University of Stuttgart, Germany**

Resilience has become a buzzword that “to put it provocatively, is nothing and everything at one and the same time” (Mahdini 11). Pointing to both its commonality and undetermined nature, resilience has been described as “ordinary magic” (Masten; Masten and Powell 12): it is familiar yet also seems to ‘magically’ occur even where risk factors and adversity appear to predict a negative outcome. In this conference, we aim to address the role of Anglophone literatures in examining, representing, questioning, and fostering this ‘ordinary magic’ across temporalities. Resilience as a concept has itself a resilient history. First used by Francis Bacon in 1626 to refer to the “resilience” of an echo, Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) defines the word as the “act of starting or leaping back”. Pointing to something in the past rebounding in the future, while simultaneously shaping the present, the term *resilience* has a strong temporal dimension suggesting the necessity of paying close attention to resilience temporalities.

The now common associations of resilience with elasticity were first developed in the nineteenth century by natural philosophers and engineers in the classification of durable materials like timber. The Victorian era was characterised by industrial and environmental upheaval that increasingly relied on the greater hardness and flexibility of not only the newly-developed machinery and infrastructure, but also the individual. Samuel Smiles’s hugely successful *Self-Help* (1859), a staple of British liberalism, argued that “National progress is the sum of individual industry” and reliance on the self “constitutes the true source of national vigour and strength” (1-2). Indeed, the nineteenth-century emphasis on individualism and liberalism laid the groundwork for the ongoing instrumentalisation of the “resilient subject” as supposedly “an individualised subject charged with the responsibility to adapt to, or bounce back from, inevitable shocks in an unstable world” (Anderson 61). These issues come into sharp focus today through ecological disasters and the rise of technology.

Present-day notions of resilience increasingly revolve around alternative understandings of the concept that criticise latent neoliberal thinking and explore the cognitive undertones of resilience. While “anti-resilience has also begun to coalesce into its own narrative” (O’Brien 48), the widely used term ‘cognitive resilience’ testifies to the predominant role of the cognitive sciences with regard to resilience research. The field of cognitive literary studies, in particular, since operating at the interface of narrative and mind, can be an essential tool for making sense of the cognitive processes underlying mental and emotional flexibility that may enable or foster resilience. Next to examinations of the interplay between cognitive, emotional, and physical aspects of resilience, for this conference, we are particularly interested in dealing not with concrete traumatic events but, feeding into “a new, post-trauma paradigm” (Basseler 15), with threats in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity.

Looking to the future, we live in an era of immense uncertainty both regarding the natural environment and technology, with climate change and artificial intelligent systems being the arguably most prominent examples. Climate fiction, in the face of the enormous temporal and spatial scales of climate change, has become a site of engaging with, negotiating, and questioning (predominant definitions of) resilience, especially by considering global perspectives on a global phenomenon.

Literary texts themselves also adopt strategies of resilience in order to frame and depict the incomprehensible scales of the changing climate. Narratives depicting intelligent systems deal with the concept of resilience when they explore anxieties about the future as well as hopes and ambitions with technology. After all, “mechanisms for maintaining stability, survival, and safety” are not only pertinent to resilient subjects, societies and nature but extend to technical systems as well (Cavelty et al. 4). Allowing us to interrogate the ability of dynamic systems “to adapt successfully to disturbances” (Masten 308), literature presents possible futures of automated self-learning technologies, natural environments, and our interactions with them.

The ‘ordinary magic’ of literature allows us to think together past, present, and futures and thus to examine, critically evaluate, and foster resilience. To better understand the common ability to deal with past and present adversities and with unexpected futures, we welcome papers addressing topics including, but not limited to:

- resilience temporalities in literature (including past disruptions and/or unexpected futures; protracting states of emergency; preparing for threats; linking and unlinking temporalities; radical change and discontinuity);
- historically and culturally specific discourses or manifestations of resilience;
- historical connections between resilience and (neo)liberalism;
- cognitive-literary articulations and understandings of resilience and uncertainty, cognitive overload, lack of stimulation, etc.
- literary depictions of and engagements with resilience regarding ecological processes;
- literary depictions of and engagements with resilience regarding technological systems;
- literature as a cultural source of resilience
- literary forms that afford narrating and/or encouraging resilience.

Abstracts of no more than 300 words should be sent to [Nina.Engelhardt@ilw.uni-stuttgart.de](mailto:Nina.Engelhardt@ilw.uni-stuttgart.de) and [Andrea.Talmann@ilw.uni-stuttgart.de](mailto:Andrea.Talmann@ilw.uni-stuttgart.de) by 29 September 2023. Please include your name, e-mail address, institutional affiliation and a brief biography (max. 100 words).

#### Works Cited

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