

53. Anthropological Knowledge as More-Than-Human Co-Production (Roundtable)

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In times of pressing geo-ecological crises, underexplored dimensions of human and non-human entanglement hauntingly come to our ethnographic as well as everyday attention. To make sense of the current condition and how it affects our ethnographic field-sites it seems important to understand knowledge as always more-than-human, that is, as something that has always been created in co-production between different actors.

In this context, the creative empirical capture of field experiences and the creation of diverse as well as multimedial and speculative-driven knowledge formats is crucial to grasping multi-species responses to social-ecological change and to securing wider impact of this knowledge also beyond academia.

Based on our workshop of the GAA working group „Environmental Anthropology“ in May 2022, which examined “unruly sites of more-than-human entanglements”, we would like to discuss first findings at a roundtable and controversially debate the (dis-)advantages of creative ethnographic methods. The roundtable format is best suited for such a debate because it gives room to the potentially critical evaluation of these methods as well as exploring their manifold possible areas of application from different perspectives. What possibilities, for example, are opened up by “interviewing a plant”, writing ethno-graphic novels, or speculative fiction? And what are their limitations? While many anthropologists agree on the importance of non-human entities for human affairs, (how) can we think of a less asymmetrical anthropology not centered around human logos? And how does this debate relate to earlier and ongoing debates on decolonial epistemologies and methodologies? In this context, we would like to invite anthropologists who have experience with graphic novels and other speculative formats or have worked with or an interest in multi-species methods.

To discuss these questions and more, the AG Umweltethnologie has assembled five researchers that work with experimental methods in the realm of multispecies studies and production of knowledge on and with the more-than-human.

Hilal Alkan is a researcher at Leibniz Zentrum Moderner Orient. Her research is focused on care and migration. Her most recent, DFG funded project is titled "In the Company of Plants: Multispecies Care and Migrant Home-Making in Germany."

The core idea of her current project is to explore how far home-making is a multispecies endeavor, how plants and people jointly make certain places their home. While being well experienced in conventional (human) ethnography, she is experimenting with methods to get closer to the lifeworlds of the plants participating in her research. As experimental methods such as an auto-ethnography with plants or making detailed drawings are directed towards achieving an "exact sensorial imagination" (Holdrege 2013), the limits of co-production of knowledge through this "thin description" need to be addressed carefully.

Michaela Fenske is chair of European Ethnology/Empirical Cultural Studies, JMU Würzburg. Her research interests include historical anthropology, research on narrative culture, anthropology of knowledge, sustainability studies and multi-species studies.

Currently, she works on how the world as being shaped by different species is narrated. Asking what a non-anthropocentric way of narrating the world might look like, her work engages the methodological pluralism and freedom to experiment offered by anthropological methods. Following recent approaches of Ecocriticism and Econarratology, she views narration as a practice of understanding, but also of making the world. Inspired by classical methods of storytelling and referring to Haraway and others, her research deals with speculative, even utopian forms of narration and concomitant attempts to make worlds otherwise.

Martin Gruber works as an anthropologist and filmmaker at the Department of Anthropology and Cultural Research, University of Bremen. Currently, he conducts ethnographic research on the relationships between humans and honeybees in Cameroon, Japan and Germany.

Martin has been using ethnographic film as a method of research throughout his career. His current research on human-honeybee entanglements focuses on the sensorial and corporeal aspects of the encounter and aims to find filmic means to decenter humans and take the perspectives of bees and other non-human actors into account. One of the research outcomes is a multimodal publication combining written text and audio-visual material.

Susanne Schmitt is a cultural anthropologist, sensory ethnographer, and interdisciplinary artist who works primarily with installation and somatic processes. Her teaching and collaborative activities include visiting professorships (MCTS Munich) and transnational residencies (Sense Lab, Montreal). She is a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies in Potsdam, Germany.

Her work focuses on creative collaborations within and beyond the label "art meets science". Multispecies worlds and the aesthetic dimensions of workplaces and sites of knowledge production such as natural history museums, aquariums, historical textile and fashion collections, or botanical gardens are central to her work. Her work includes choreographic audio walks for natural history museums around the world, cocktails that function as invitations to dine together with insects and as memento mori and a former nail salon temporarily transformed into the marsh and water gardens of the Berlin Botanical Garden to address issues of interspecies touch.

Sandro Simon is a PhD candidate and research associate in the Emmy Noether junior research group DELTA at the University of Cologne. For his dissertation project, he has been working mainly in Senegal. His research interests encompass multispecies relations, water, work, the body, and multimodality.

His works explore how multimodality allows to inquire and represent the amphibious multiplicity of the Sine-Saloum Delta beyond fixed categories and a single story. For instance, audiovisual ethnography allowed to sense beyond common human perspectives, while performance, fiction, collage or drawing opened up a path towards (collective) imagination. Bringing these methods into patchy, multimodal assemblages then seeks to explore the in-between and to transpose both critical reflexion on methodology and representation and sensory and cognitive perspectives.