



A Non-secular Anthropocene: Spirits, Specters and Other Nonhumans in a Time of Environmental Change

Conference

Copenhagen, 8-10 June 2017

Conference abstract

What place do spirits, gods, ghouls, and ghosts occupy in the Anthropocene? What spirit ecologies haunt the “naturecultures” of anthropogenic environmental crisis at the limits of capitalist expansion? In a thawing Siberia, Eveny herders respect reindeer for their magical ability to fly. In a deforested Amazonia, Yanomami Indians use the mind-altering properties of the calcium tree to achieve shamanistic union with their ancestors. And the basic creed of the Catholic Church, still the largest church in a secular world, is that wheat bread and wine change into the flesh and blood of Christ during the Eucharistic rite. The nonhuman landscape of animals, plants, fungi, bacteria, and rocks has always been deeply entangled with that of religion, spirits and magic in the organization of human societies. Whereas the project of Enlightenment modernity was premised on an attempt to separate this entangled world into the distinct realms of “nature”, “religion” and “poli-



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tics”, the suggestion that the world has entered the Anthropocene – a time of accelerated and human-induced environmental change – has arguably begun to destabilize these divisions by highlighting the political ecology of nature. “Nature” and its future, it now seems apparent, are intensely political and politically contingent. The question is: what does this mean for the spaces that used to be called “religion” or “magic”? To what extent have eschatology and environmental change come to map the same thing in the Anthropocene? If so, how might anthropology retool itself to study “the supernatural” in a world after nature or to better understand immortality in an age of extinction?

This conference explores the magical ecology of nonhumans as a way of answering these questions. Flying reindeer, ancestor plants, and transubstantiated grain entangle magic and biology, theology and ecology, in equal measure. Ethnographies of nonhumans that are magical as much as they are biological, geological, political or technological are particularly relevant for the Anthropocene, an era eminently shaped by bio-geo-techno-magical entanglements. As such, attention to the magical ecologies of nonhumans will help us stake out the study of a non-secular Anthropocene: an approach to environmental crisis that begins with the eco-theologies of co-species life to ask questions about the links between political ecology and political theology. The conference suggests the need for an anthropological critique of the secularist tendencies in much Anthropocene scholarship. It diagnoses the hidden theologies of dominant Anthropocene narratives in which the future takes the form of apocalypse, eco-topia or denouement. And it explores what lies beyond these narratives by recuperating anthropology’s legacy of studying the worlds of the otherwise.

Paper abstracts

Flora, Fauna ... and the Fabulous? ‘Supernatural’ Hauntings in a Nature-Culture World

Mayanthi Fernando (University of California, Santa Cruz)

This exploratory paper asks why the non-human or more-than-human has largely been restricted to entities that previously fell under the sign of the “natural.” Why are many scholars more open to accepting mosquitos and mountains as historical agents and sentient beings with whom we are in relation, than they are angels, djinn, and other spirits? What are the secular epistemologies that underlie modern attitudes toward evidence, epistemologies anchored in distinctions between animate and inanimate, visible and invisible, material and immaterial, natural and supernatural, and, ultimately, real and not-real. How might recent attention to the “natural” replay older attachments to the material as the site of the real? And how might those attachments draw on, even as they reconfigure or overturn, the division between “religion” and its others (shamanism, animism, fetishism, etc.) that were as much a part of the secular as the division between religion and science?



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Tingling Armpits and the Man Who Hugs Lions: Dangerous Ghosts of Sameness and the Recognition of Difference between Species

Pierre du Plessis (Aarhus University/UCSC)

In a viral YouTube video, Dan hugs Siri, a lion that he raised from a cub. When I attended this spectacle in person with my San tracking collaborators at the wildlife refuge in the Kalahari Desert, Siri went into a panic despite her familiarity with frequent tourist crowds. This surprised Dan but not the trackers. My tracker companions interpreted the lion's reaction as her recognition of them based on past histories of lions and people hunting each other. "Those people used to kill our people," one tracker said. While humans and nonhumans were once the same in the Kalahari, they became different long ago, rendering them dangerous to one another. Yet resonances of this past sameness allow particular kinds of recognition, felt as tingling in the armpits of my tracking companions, alerting them to the proximity of lions prior to encounter, and seen in Siri's reaction to the trackers. Today, the difference between humans and nonhumans is increasingly amplified by the reconfiguration of more-than-human social relations in Kalahari landscapes. Intense ecological and social transformations in the last century, including the privatization of the commons, the rise of industrial cattle farming, large-scale resource extraction, infrastructural growth, and the widespread sedentarization of formerly mobile human communities, have changed the kinds of encounters allowed between people and wildlife. This paper explores how these transformations have amplified difference between humans and nonhumans while simultaneously rendering the recognition of these ghosts of sameness especially dangerous.

Secularizing Salmon: The Making of a Modern Japanese Fisheries Cooperative

Heather Swanson (Aarhus University)

How do people actively secularize their relations to non-humans? How can processes of secularization affect more-than-human ecologies in unexpected ways? This talk explores these questions by tracing how Hokkaido fishermen have explicitly "modernized" their relations with salmon. In recent decades, the new generation of men who rose to power in the region's fisheries actively rejected their fathers' "traditional" conceptions of salmon as lively beings. Drawing on critical comparisons with American and Soviet economic models, they have worked to develop new ways of



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being in the world that are at once resolutely secular/modern and empathetically non-Western. While this new generation's efforts to secularize fishing have been linked to increasing commodification, they have not led to increases in environmental degradation. On the contrary, through their efforts at self-secularization, the fishermen have developed new political skills that enable them to intervene in state-driven environmental debates and concretely improve watershed health.

Terra Infirma: God, Sin, and Seismic Prophetism in Southern California

Michael Vine (University of Cambridge)

Put in motion by a dream recounted to me by an elderly interlocutor during fieldwork in crisis-stricken Southern California, this paper delves into one particularly vibrant genre of contemporary U.S. prophetic culture: dreams, visions, and apocalyptic proclamations of the destruction of California in the wake of an epic earthquake of untold magnitude at the hands of God. Situating my interlocutor's dream amidst the broader social field of this prophetic practice, the paper excavates a specific concatenation of the human, moral, political, and geological which calls to mind yet runs very much athwart secular-scientific diagnoses of a new geological epoch: the Anthropocene.

Spiritual Infrastructures

Victor Cova (Aarhus University)

It can be tempting to look to animism for salvation from the catastrophic Fall from Nature caused by secularism. It is just as tempting to dismiss the nonsecular as a trivial distraction from the material causes of the Anthropocene. To help prevent these temptations I present two vignettes about roads and hydroelectric power-stations in the Ecuadorian Amazon in relation to indigenous Amazonian people and North American Evangelical missionaries. These vignettes raise a number of issues concerning the relation between "nature" and "supernature", secularism and infrastructures, translation and redemption, and competing ideas of the apocalypse. These issues have been taken up recently by Latour (*Face à Gaïa*) and by Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (*The Ends of the World*). This paper looks for capitalism in the tensions between land and river, roads and electricity, spirits and angels, Christianity and perspectivism, Europe and South America.



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Planetary Spirit

Bronislaw Szerszynski (Lancaster University)

In this talk I will sketch the outlines of a theory of 'planetary spirit'. I will explore how we might make room for spirit in our understanding of how planets pass through key moments of immanence-breaking as they self-differentiate over deep time. I will then discuss ideas of 'global spirit' as a particular reconfiguration of Earthly powers, with reference both to Karl Jaspers' claim of an Axial Age around 500 BCE involving the rejection of immanent deities in favour of a transcendent divine, and to Deleuze and Guattari's analysis in *Anti-Oedipus* of the recoding and reterritorialisation of the powers of the Earth onto the 'full bodies' of earthly or celestial rulers. Finally, following Gayatri Spivak's (2003) contrast between 'globality' and 'planetary', I will suggest that we use 'planetary spirit' to refer to ways of thinking the spirituality of the planet that avoid treating it as closed or unified, with reference both to benign 'Earth beings' (de la Cadena 2015) and malign 'low spirits' of the Anthropocene (Szerszynski 2017).

From the Horse's Mouth?

Samantha Hurn (Exeter University)

The complex ways in which information can be disseminated between members of different species is a burgeoning area of interest in both the social and biological sciences. While anthropologists have long prioritised spoken, grammatical language, there are countless other ways of sharing meaning which exist and flourish beyond our rather limited perceptual abilities. One controversial possibility which has received very little academic attention to date, is psychic communication. In animal behaviour, knowledge of the extra-sensory abilities of some animal species makes the possibilities of psychic communication less controversial, while anthropologists are regularly confronted by the fact that while 'Western' cultures only recognise five senses, many other human cultures around the world recognise additional senses which connect us to, and allow us to communicate with and understand, the world around us. In this paper, I will explore the potential of trans-species psychic communication as a corrective to the dominance of anthropocentric voices in the Anthropocene.



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Chased by Light: Digital Art, Luminous Ecologies, and Spectres of Rebuke

Jennifer Deger (Aarhus University and James Cook University)

A central challenge of the Anthropocene involves cultivating new ways of seeing—and so relating to—the non-human world (Colebrook 2014, Purdy 2015, Ghosh 2016). But how to redress the complex tangle of fear, guilt, and overwhelm that surely underpins the astonishingly widespread ‘blindness’ to environmental urgencies of our times? Art is one means. This presentation asks: What place might ghosts, the uncanny, and other kinds of hauntings claim in such endeavours? How might forms of spectral life invoke an ethics and politics adequate to the terror, and other affective turbulence, awaiting those willing to ‘de-blinker’ themselves? I will present work from Miyarrka Media from Aboriginal northern Australia and the ‘ultra-technologists’ known as teamLab from Japan: two digital art collectives that mobilise spirits, non-secular vision, and fields of light to invite, and amplify, an experience of kinship with other species and non-human forces. To very different effect.

Golden Mountain, Iron Heap: A Poetic Ethnography of Extraction in Eastern Mongolia

Jessica Madison (University of California, Santa Cruz)

This paper explores Mongolia's mineral extraction boom through an examination of local concepts of landscape. In order to engage seriously with local place-making practices, it analyzes the steppe topologically, looking at attributes of landscape that transcend material upheaval. In eastern Mongolia, poetry is a primary means of mediating human interaction with space, and thus poetic literacy is necessary for producing and understanding knowledge that turns space into landscape. The paper focuses on a central puzzle: how does what otherwise appears to be a closed and harmonious magical ecology accommodate a zinc mine? I ask: how can a tradition that sacralizes the unbroken earth also name mines after mountains? Considering both mountain and mine as *ovoo*, nodes that function as both “energy centers” and “sacrifice zones” within the landscape, the paper interfaces with local theories that illuminate poetry to be a creator of worlds, and highlights the ambivalence, ambiguity, and poetic irony of mineral extraction in Mongolia.



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Feeling Life Force: Ecological Spirituality Among Settler Environmentalists in Florida

John Moran (Stanford University)

This paper examines the spirituality of participants in the 2015 Apalachicola RiverTrek, a five-day kayak camping fundraiser organized to advocate for the troubled Apalachicola River and Bay. Several participants described a life force or life energy present in living and sometimes nonliving beings that could be felt and connected to, improving one's psychological condition and possibly relieving pain. This paper examines the practice of feeling life force, and traces this idea through the participants' religious roots. Although associated with New Age beliefs grounded in commercialized and stereotypical depictions of pan-Native American cosmology, beliefs in life force among settler environmentalists grew out of sustained collaborations with Native American activists, teachers, and writers. Feeling life force was associated with belief in the sacredness of all beings and the sacredness of natural features, especially waterscapes, motivating environmental activism and the need to formally recognize the spiritual value of the Apalachicola River.

Of Volcanoes, Saints, Trash, and Frogs. Eschatological Talks and Plural Ecologies in Arequipa, Peru

Astrid Oberborbeck Andersen, Aalborg University

In Arequipa, Peru's second largest, people draw on various registers to understand and respond to changes they experience in weather, climate, the environment and society. Mining, contamination, less rain, sudden cold, and earthquakes are among the phenomena that have to be dealt with, at the same time as political elections and economic hardship. During one year of ethnographic fieldwork volcanoes, saints, trash and frogs were among the nonhuman entities referred to in conversations and engaged with when responding to the changes that trouble the world and everyday life of Arequipans. This paper gathers stories about the agencies of nonhuman entities, and asks what anthropology can do to carve out a space for these beings in Anthropocene scholarship. Rather than emphasizing the magic dimension of these beings, the paper suggests a realist concept of plural ecology – one open to beings of different registers - when scholarly intervening in an Anthropocene present.



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“A Paradise Nearly Lost”: The Political Theology of Marine Conservation in Indonesia.

Nils Bubandt (Aarhus University)

Conservation in the coral seas of Raja Ampat in the Papuan province of Indonesia is remarkably successful, an international model of effective community-driven environmental protection. This paper traces the history and spiritual politics of this success, showing how ancestors, spirits, and God play a central, but awkward role in the production of environmental subjectivity and coral governance in Raja Ampat. It concludes by reflecting on the relevance of hope – millenarian and ecological – in a time of environmental crisis.

Golden Snail Opera: The More-Than-Human Performance of Friendly Farming on Taiwan’s Lanyang Plain

Anna Tsing (University of California, Santa Cruz), on behalf of co-authors Yen-ling Tsai, Isabelle Carbonell, and Joelle Chevrier

Combining video and performance-oriented text, this genre-bending *o-pei-la* is a multispecies enactment of experimental natural history. Our players consider the “golden treasure snail” (金寶螺 *kim-pó-lê*, *Pomacea canaliculata* and relatives, golden apple snail), first imported to Taiwan from Argentina in 1979 for an imagined escargot industry, but now a major pest of rice agriculture in Taiwan and across Asia. Whereas farmers in the Green Revolution’s legacy use poison to exterminate snails, a new generation of “friendly farmers” (友善小農 *youshan xiaonong*) in Taiwan’s Yilan County hand pick snails and attempt to learn enough about their lives to insert farming as one among many multispecies life ways within the paddy. Drawing on a variety of knowledge sources, including personal experience, international science, social media, traditional calendars, and local understandings of ghosts and deities, these farmers construct an experimental natural history of both new and old paddy-field denizens. Their experiments self-consciously intersect with the investigations made by other species of the paddy field. The performance, available also in video and article form, contributes to debates about radical alterity, showing how anthropologists can do more than sort for difference: we can identify vernacular patches of practice that mix and juxtapose many ontological alternatives.



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