

Rubber Boots Methods for the Anthropocene

Conference abstracts

Nathalia Brichet (University of Copenhagen)

Cholera, Common Ground and Undisciplined Methods: Messages in a Bottle

In 1853, during the cholera outbreak in Copenhagen, a sample of cholera-infected faeces – so-called rice-water – was collected and sealed in a glass bottle. Eventually, the sample ended up in the Medical Museum in Copenhagen where it is now exhibited and perceived as a unique museum object. Recently, a group of microbiologists, epidemiologists, and cholera researchers voiced a wish to open the bottle, believing that the DNA of the cholera bacteria in the bottle together with extensive archival material from Copenhagen can tell us about cholera transmission ways and thereby improve interventions during present-day cholera outbreaks, particularly in Bangladesh. The museum, though, is not entirely sure whether to compromise this unique object and has asked an anthropologist (me) to explore the knowledge potentials of the bottle whether it is opened or not.

I thus find myself in an inherently interdisciplinary setting (involving scientists from different disciplines, health workers, engineers, historians, curators, future visitors to the museum etc.). In this paper, I argue that this setting requires methods that craft the cholera bottle as a common ground – i.e. a site where different concerns can be discussed; where thoughts are shared; and where new relations are offered and others abandoned. Anthropological methods, I suggest, are opportunities to make and nurture such composite common ground, and during my fieldwork I thus try to open up to ever more questions about the ecologies of knowledge that cholera becomes part of. Rather than assessing whether it is scientifically legitimate to map the DNA of a past cholera epidemic at the expense of a museum object, I try out methods that explore what cholera also is – when seen as materializing different knowledge interests, academic politics, global connections. All with the aim of highlighting questions about which stories to tell at a medical museum in Denmark in the 21st century.

Heather Swanson (Aarhus University)

The Rubber Boots in the Back of my Closet: Or, How Muddy Research Shapes Scholarly Practice Beyond Field Encounters

This talk examines the long-term, rippling effects of "rubber boots" research. How, it asks, does it come to shape forms of intellectual life that are not directly field-oriented? In light of anthropological conversations about the importance of field research for modes of analysis and thinking, this talk explores how new kinds of cross-disciplinary practices in the field hold the potential to reconfigure other types of academic practice. These conversations are grounded in concrete examples from my work in fisheries management as well as with the AURA project.

Daniel Münster (Heidelberg University, Germany)

The symbiosis of Farming: Telling Multispecies Stories of Crisis and Recuperation at the Agrarian Frontier in South India.

This paper offers a reflection on the methodological challenges of anthropologically studying farming and agriculture informed by a curiosity for the biological, chemical and ecological co-constitution of an agrarian crisis in South India. In agriculture, stories about the natural-cultural and symbiotic composition of the world abound. While smallholder farmers like to talk about dirt, chemicals, plants and earthworms it seems that anthropologists have been reluctant to take the material basis of cultivation seriously. Drawing on my collaborative fieldwork among farmers and other agricultural experts in a distressed landscape, I reflect on the possibilities and limits of giving more-than-human and de-colonial answers to the pertinent questions of the field: What went wrong? And what should be done about it?

Caitlin Morgan (University of Vermont)

Interrogating an Index: How can Standardized Measurements Incorporate Difference?

This paper is based on my experience using mixed methods as part of an interdisciplinary team investigating “food agency,” or the relative capacity of individuals to navigate their food environment. Food environments are patchy: incredibly diverse and experienced differently by different people. Our team was building a theory and a quantitative scale from qualitative data, but had only conducted in-depth research in one place. I wanted our tools to reflect different individuals, places, and communities. Food studies are necessarily multi-species studies, and the intersection of consumer and consumed is a space that *can* capture both specific, lived experiences and the global system in crisis. In fact, participants in our expanded project consciously connected the two in their own daily practices. This paper will explain the project’s background, how we integrated qualitative and quantitative methods to inform each other, what resulted (and didn’t) from the process, and personal lessons about conducting this kind of research.

Rachel Cypher (University of California, Santa Cruz)

Buckets Gather and Boots Come in Twos: Developing Tsingian Disturbance Analysis to Make Empirical Claims

In this paper, I reflect on what I have learned from Anna Tsing. I introduce what I am calling “Tsingian disturbance analysis,” outline what I think that means, and describe how I used it in fieldwork. I reflect on the way that I later collated fieldwork observations into arguments about the world using the “buckets gather and boots come in twos” method. In conclusion I offer some musings on what I discovered - “men love cattle” - and what that means for our historical presents.

Donna Haraway (University of California, Santa Cruz)

Unblocking Attachment Sites

AURA has practiced the arts of finding and strengthening attachment sites needed for caring for damaged places in order to promote partial healing and more robust multispecies presents and futures. AURA's projects and people teach me how knowing anything useful about the details of naturalcultural attachment sites requires messy, sustained field work from biologists, artists, ethnographers, poets, residents, scavengers, squatters, technicians, and refugees of many kinds. Starting in the ongoing Plantationocene, I want to revisit some of the attachment sites that AURA has tied me into in order to make them even more sticky for the work and play of continuing to care in urgent times.

Alder Keleman Saxena (Aarhus University affiliate)

Toward a Human Ecology for the Anthropocene: Ethnobotany and Multispecies Ethnography

This paper considers continuities and disjunctures between the multispecies ethnography and the broader field of human ecology. Drawing from an ethnographic meditation on one ill-fated interspecies relationship – involving the author and three Bolivian potato tubers – the paper considers how ethnobotanical research on people-plant relationships might, and might not, fall within a “multispecies” frame. After acknowledging some common roots linking ethnobotany and multispecies approaches, the paper outlines some lessons from multispecies ethnography that might aid people-plant researchers in expanding their subject to encompass not just the human uses of other living species, but also how these species become “lively” in human-ecological relations. These lessons include: attention to the relationship between time and materiality; viewing agricultural relationships not as bilateral and localized, but as multilateral, and multi-scalar; thinking about interspecies relations not just as functionally, but aesthetically; and questioning the assumption of human mastery over agricultural crops. The paper concludes by arguing for the importance of integrating similar principles into human-ecological research more broadly, in order to tackle Anthropocene challenges.

Peter Funch (Aarhus University) **Stine Vestbo** (Aarhus University) **Joseph Klein** (University of California, Santa Cruz) **and Anna Tsing** (Aarhus University & University of California, Santa Cruz)

A Cross-disciplinary Attempt to Study Trade of Marine Ornamental Species

Global trade of exotic marine species is a multimillion dollar industry, supporting livelihoods throughout the world, especially in the tropics. Long distance trade of marine ornamental species is enabled by the development of global transport infrastructure, and is known to cause unintentional and unexpected effects, such as the introduction and establishment of non-indigenous species. Approaching and answering research questions about the trade of live marine animals require methods and knowledge from several disciplines such as multispecies ecologies, histories of source and sink areas, and commodity chain mapping.

Indonesia holds the highest diversity of marine species, and is the largest exporter of ornamental live material from coral reefs, that are shipped to aquarists in the US, Europe, and Japan. We aimed at asking

and answering questions about the trade of marine ornamental species in Indonesia and the consequences locally and globally. Initially, we focused on the live coral trade in our research planning and design. During field work, we successfully retrieved coral specimens from a coral nursery, but due to unforeseen logistic problems the further study of the corals was hampered. As a consequence, we began to study the non-coral species associated to the coral substrate, especially sponges, and the diversity of sponges on the coral substrate in Indonesia was surprisingly high. Furthermore, we have now recovered 19 unwanted and unidentified marine species of sponges in public tropical aquaria in Denmark. This has led to new research questions and changed the focus of our project. We will highlight issues that have caused us great distress and situations where our research methodologies have driven us apart, but we will also emphasize the appreciation of joint field work that we have come to experience, and how asking questions across of disciplines can lead to a deeper understanding of a given research area.

Harshavardhan Bhat (University of Westminster)

A Short Story of a Monsoon Air Methodology - Wet Shoes with No Rain

These *wet shoes with no rain* are notes on a monsoon air methodology. These notes reflect on my process so far in working with some specific material interlocutors in/with New Delhi, on a conversation about a transforming monsoon air. Sharing observations on some of these materials and forms of life, relevant to the project, I ask how the monsoons transforms methods and methodologies in their very act - as fieldwork, as theory, as archive, as body, as relations, as anti-colonial thermodynamic material politics. The project is perhaps at best then, an experiment with monsoonal methodologies and methods, forcing disciplines to collapse, as the air sweeps things away, curates its own forms and versions of life, as its chemically floats higher through the Himalayas. Here I am, walking around the south Delhi ridge with muddy sneakers looking for a thorny shrub. It's a clear day this July 7th but the monsoon's here. The forecast's not in my phone. It's in the body of the air.

Pierre du Plessis (Aarhus University)

Tracking as Method: Engagements with More-Than-Human Methods in a Desert of Tracks

One of the great challenges for multispecies ethnographers is finding ways for engaging with the methods through which more-than-humans make worlds. That is, in developing our own methods, we need to take seriously the methods of more-than-humans. This paper explores tracking as one such method of attending to *and* becoming entangled with more-than-human methodologies and their world-making practices. As both emergent indices *and* sedimented histories of movement, tracks are gatherings of movement that tell stories about how more-than-humans do landscapes and make worlds. At the same time, tracks *are* emerging worlds in motion with which trackers become entangled through their own movements. Through a close examination of the phenomenology of tracks in the Kalahari Desert, this paper argues that tracking is reflexive a practice of submerging oneself into, and attending to, more-than-human methodologies for doing and making emergent multispecies worlds.

Astrid O. Andersen (Aalborg University) and **Janne Flora** (Aarhus University)

More than Rubber Boots Methods: Reflections from Interdisciplinary and Collaborative Fieldwork in Northwest Greenland

What can three pairs of rubber boots - bought, borrowed and used during fieldwork teach us about changes in human - environment relations and collaborative research in the High Arctic? This paper offers reflections on the entwinement of material and methodological challenges of an interdisciplinary research endeavour about living resources and human societies in Northwest Greenland. By tracing back the footsteps of archaeologists, biologists, anthropologists as well as hunters who inhabit the region, and by comparing the choices and trajectories connected to different fieldwork footwear, we assess the footprint of methodological choices, and suggest a more-than-rubber-boots-approach: learning across disciplines and species demands multiple methodological registers - and footwear. Knowing on beforehand what to pack and what to look for is impossible.

Katy Overstreet (Aarhus University)

Disturbing Deer or Deer Disturbance?: Embodying the Politics of Place through Multispecies Coordinations

This paper focuses on disturbance as a methodological attunement and radical form of openness that undoes researchers in post-industrial landscapes. At the former lignite mine that we have come to call "BKL," AURA researchers have been steeped in the unfamiliar whether it be the "washboard" pattern of the ground or the slanted trees. Through a discussion of AURA research related to red deer at BKL, I argue that embodied presence in a field site produces the possibilities for epistemologies of the unusual, the uncanny, and the uncomfortable. While embodied presence has long been a core tenant in anthropological research, I engage the importance of disturbance as a methodology for studying multispecies landscapes in the Anthropocene more widely.

Colin Hoag (Smith College)

N-Dimensional Hypervolumes of Empire: Positivism, Interpretivism, and the Ecologies of Shrubs in Lesotho

Can critical, interpretivist anthropology draw upon positivist ecological science in explaining the structure and history of human-disturbed co-species worlds? In the mountain rangelands of Lesotho, shrubs are said to be encroaching into grassland pastures, stoking fears of widespread land degradation. During my field research, government conservation workers blamed overgrazing for helping shrubs out-compete grasses. Peasant livestock owners, in contrast, emphasized recent diminished rainfall that favors drought-tolerant shrubs over grasses. I explore these two landscape historiographies through positivist and interpretivist frames, hoping to render sensible the ecological laws that structure plant intimacies and the world histories that make those laws matter.

Christine Fentz (Secret Hotel)

Dark Walks

We invite you to enter the darkness of the November moon, to enter silence and dialogues, and to enter a sharing of some of the considerations behind the programming of the recently held symposium EARTHBOUND – The Multispecies Paradigm Shift.

Jon Nyquist (UCSC)

Drip Torch Inquiries: Meta-Questions for Ambiguous Forests

In this paper I take the practices of fire managers in the southwest of Australia as the basis for an exploration of how forests in the Anthropocene can answer our inquiries. Fire managers in this part of the world carry out prescribed burning to create landscape scale mosaics primarily in an effort to limit the occurrence of large and damaging summer bushfires. In doing so, they engage in what I call drip torch inquiries, an intense dialogue with the forest, both pragmatic and driven by curiosity, which is oriented above all around the question: “how will you burn?” This question is posed in equal parts through measurements and through touch and feel. It is posed daily and often several times a day, and is both about how the forest will burn today and how it will burn in the future. But drip torch inquiries also involve meta-questions—questions about questions, about the nature of the dialogue, and about what the forests answers might look like. From drip torch inquiries and forests whose answers sometimes look like wavering indecision or sudden change of mood, fire managers create tentative wholes and patterns whose parts are a kind of mundane volatility—an everyday indeterminacy that might be endemic to both bushfire itself and to climate change.

Andrew Matthews (University of California, Santa Cruz)

Walking in Italian Forests and Imagining Global Environmental Change

Walking through Tuscan forests, I am drawn into the more than human relations of chestnut and pine trees, of the peasants who cared for these trees, and of the pathogens and fires which transformed this landscape. Through a practice of looking, noticing, and drawing, I become aware of landscape patches and plant and soil morphologies. These morphologies can demand structural stories of peasantries, industrialization, and urban domination, or they can be projected into systems models of global environmental change. Rubber boots methods which pull us into landscapes can travel through us and project our imagination into other possible worlds.