

<http://somatosphere.net/2010/10/multispecies-ethnography-special-issue.html>

“Multispecies Ethnography”: a special issue of Cultural Anthropology

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By Eugene Raikhel

Just when you thought it was safe to engage in human exceptionalism.... *Cultural Anthropology* comes along with a special issue on “[Multispecies Ethnography](#).”

In their [introduction](#)— which surveys a range of literatures and conceptual turns which have preceded and laid the groundwork for this “species turn” — S. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich write:

“A new genre of writing and mode of research has arrived on the anthropological stage: multispecies ethnography. Creatures previously appearing on the margins of anthropology—as part of the landscape, as food for humans, as symbols—have been pressed into the foreground in recent ethnographies. Animals, plants, fungi, and microbes once confined in anthropological accounts to the realm of zoe or “bare life”—that which is killable—have started to appear alongside humans in the realm of bios, with legibly biographical and political lives (cf. Agamben 1998). Amid apocalyptic tales about environmental destruction (Harding 2010), anthropologists are beginning to find modest examples of biocultural hope—writing of insect love (Raffles 2010), of delectable

mushrooms that flourish in the aftermath of ecological destruction (Tsing, for the Matsutake Worlds Research Group 2009), and of microbial cultures enlivening the politics and value of food (Paxson 2008)...

....

In the decades after midcentury, many cultural anthropologists worked to denaturalize intrahuman differences established along the lines of gender, race, class, nation, caste, sexuality, and ability. In the late 20th century, developments within the discipline of biology itself began to trouble assumptions that biotic “nature” could be a stable foundation on which forms of human social and cultural life might be built. The “facts of life” became highly malleable. Feminist scholars of kinship, gender, and reproductive technology—for example, Emily Martin (1987), Verena Stolcke, (1988), Marilyn Strathern (1992a, 1992b), Cori Hayden (1995), Lynn Morgan and Meredith Michaels (1999), Rayna Rapp (1999), and Sarah Franklin (2001)—were among the first to realize that the discipline should turn its attention to the making and remaking of biological knowledge and substance, particularly as it impinged on notions of relatedness. The new biologies transformed ideas about race, too. The “biology” of race migrated from population genetics to genomes, both reinforcing and undoing earlier understandings of human taxonomy (Fullwiley 2007; Haraway 1995; Montoya 2007; Nelson 2008; Reardon 2005; TallBear 2007).

Anthropologists also attended to how new kinds of identities built around genetic and genomic knowledge and conditions—what Paul Rabinow in 1992 called “biosocialities”—came to organize novel political and social affiliations and communities (see Epstein 2008; Gibbon and Novas 2008; Pálsson 2007; Rose 2007; Taussig et al. 2003).

With the turn of the 21st century, *Homo sapiens* reappeared on the disciplinary stage, along with animal others and familiars. In conversations turning less to etymological reexaminations of ancient Greek or to continental philosophy, critical evolutionary and molecular anthropologists began to reexamine issues of race and gender in the context of new genetic technologies (e.g., Marks 2002, 2008).

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If anthropology has in the last 25 years accelerated its querying of what we might mean by “culture” (Abu-Lughod 1991; Clifford 1986; Gupta and Ferguson 1992), authors in this issue take aim at “species” as a grounding concept for articulating biological difference and similarity,”

([Kirksey and Helmreich 2010](#)).

However, in attempting to distinguish the logic underlying this “turn” or “move” from those which have come before it, Kirksey and Helmreich quote [Eduardo Kohn](#):

If we take otherness to be the privileged vantage from which we defamiliarize our “nature,” we risk making our forays into the nonhuman a search for ever-stranger positions from which to carry out this project. Nature begins to function like an “exotic” culture. The goal in multi-species ethnography should not just be to give voice, agency or subjectivity to the nonhuman—to recognize them as others, visible in their difference—but to force us to radically rethink these categories of our analysis as they pertain to all beings [personal communication, March 29, 2010]” ([Kirksey and Helmreich 2010](#)).

The titles and abstracts are below, but you may also want to take a look at a [resource page](#) for the issue on the journal’s website, which includes some contextualizing material and questions for classroom discussion. The editors of this special issue are also organizing a series of discussions, lectures and art exhibits during the November AAA conference in New Orleans called [Multispecies Salon 3: Swarm](#).

S. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, [The Emergence Of Multispecies Ethnography](#)

Anthropologists have been committed, at least since Franz Boas, to investigating relationships between nature and culture. At the dawn of the 21st century, this enduring interest was inflected with some new twists. An emergent cohort of “multispecies ethnographers” began to place a fresh emphasis on the subjectivity and agency of organisms whose lives are entangled with humans. Multispecies ethnography emerged at the intersection of three interdisciplinary strands of inquiry: environmental studies, science and technology studies (STS), and animal studies. Departing from classically ethnobiological subjects, useful plants and charismatic animals, multispecies ethnographers also brought understudied organisms—such as insects, fungi, and microbes—into anthropological conversations. Anthropologists gathered together at the Multispecies Salon, an art exhibit, where the boundaries of an emerging interdiscipline were probed amidst a collection of living organisms, artifacts from the biological sciences, and surprising biopolitical interventions.

Eva Hayward, [Fingeryeyes: Impressions of Cup Corals](#)

In *When Species Meet* (2008) Donna Haraway proposes that creatures' identities and affinities emerge through their encounters, their relationships. Following Haraway's lead, I attend to how different species sense and apprehend one another, leaving impressions—concretions of perceptual data, or texture. This essay reports on fieldwork alongside marine biologists and with a population of cup corals (*B. elegans*) housed at the Long Marine Laboratory, Santa Cruz, California. While I assisted researchers who were studying metabolic rates and reproductive strategies in coral communities, these cup corals simultaneously taught me that being and sensing are inextricably enfolded. We were variously situated—corals generating generations, me interpretations. We met through a material-semiotic apparatus I call “fingeryeyes.” As an act of sensuous manifesting, fingeryeyes offers a queer reading of how making sense and sensual meaning are produced through determinable and permeable species boundaries.

Agustín Fuentes, [Naturalcultural Encounters In Bali: Monkeys, Temples, Tourists, And Ethnoprimateology](#)

Examining the interface between humans and other primates can illuminate how interspecies relationships create and maintain complex social and ecological spaces. Humans and macaque monkeys share ecologies that include cultural, historical, and physiological dimensions. In this essay, I examine such ecologies while undertaking an ethnoprimateological project in Bali, Indonesia. This multispecies ethnography of humans and macaques demonstrates that human perceptions and land use intertwine with macaque social behavior and pathogen physiologies to affect local ecologies and economies for both species. In these contact zones where any clear boundary separating nature/culture is difficult to discern, I use the concept of “niche construction” and an ethnoprimateological lens to explore and understand these relationships. This article also serves as an invitation to move an ethnoprimateological approach away from the periphery and into a broader primatological and anthropological engagement with naturalcultural relations.

Celia Lowe, [Viral Clouds: Becoming H5N1 In Indonesia](#)

Through an index case in Tangerang, West Java, the Orthomyxoviridae virus H5N1 influenza became visible in Indonesia and propagated rapidly across the archipelago. This viral event incited fears of a human influenza pandemic, disrupting existing arrangements among species, peoples, institutions, and nations, and remaking their biopolitical relations and specific ontologies along the way. On the basis of ethnographic field work in technoscientific, agricultural, and security communities in Indonesia, this essay examines how a set of strains and species—the H5N1 influenza virus, wild birds, domestic poultry, and, finally, humans—combined with one another, and with ongoing Indonesian and transnational concerns over pandemic preparedness, biosecurity, and national integrity, to create a multispecies cloud. The concept of multispecies cloud refers to the narratives and material practices floating around the H5N1 event and its multiple species companions in Indonesia. As I conceptualize the cloudiness of H5N1, its key feature is the uncertainty of precisely what social and biological forms were interacting in the outbreak scenario or might consequently emerge as a consequence of entering into engagement with the virus. The influenza virus, as a quasi-species or cluster of genomes in any case of infection, is a potent source for exploring an array of biopolitical concerns in human communities that emerged alongside the virus. Risk, scale, and speculation are discussed in turn as rubrics for understanding the microbial and multispecies sociality of H5N1 influenza. Examples are drawn from the sciences of virology and ornithology, and the global health practice of disease communication, as well as from poultry agriculture.

Jake Kosek, [Ecologies Of Empire: On the New Uses of the Honeybee](#)

This essay examines the rise of the honeybee as a tool and metaphor in the U.S. “war on terror.” At present, the largest source of funding for apiary research comes from the U.S. military as part of efforts to remake entomology in an age of empire. This funding seeks to make new generations of bees sensitive to specific chemical traces—everything from plastic explosives, to the tritium used in nuclear weapons development, to land mines. Moreover, in an explicit attempt to redesign modern battlefield techniques, the Pentagon has returned to the form and metaphor of the “swarm” to combat what it takes to be the unpredictability of the enemy in the war on terror. At the same time, honeybee colonies are collapsing. Rethinking material assemblages of bees and humans in the war on terror, this essay moves beyond the constrained logic and limited politics of many epidemiological

investigations of colony collapse. Honeybees are situated within a more expansive understanding of the role of and consequences for the animal in modern empire building.

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