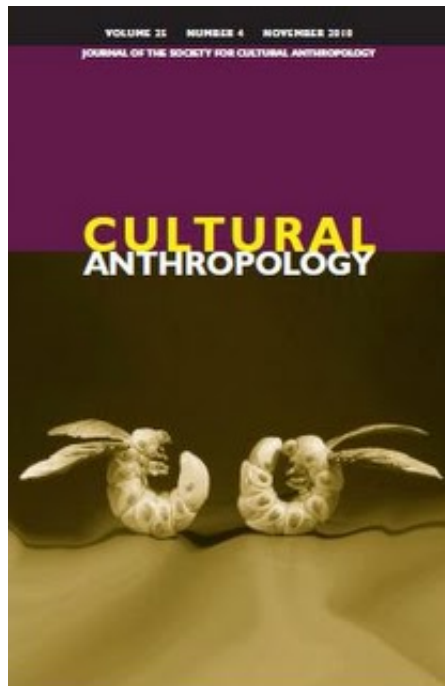


<http://somatosphere.net/2010/11/rise-of-multispecies-ethnography.html>

The Rise of Multispecies Ethnography

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By Michael Oldani



Multispecies ethnography (the study of both human and non-human organisms and their linkages both conceptually and in reality) has a truly emergent feel at the moment within (and outside) of anthropology. Many people in anthropology feel very excited about the prospects of a new inter- and intra- disciplinary field of empirical study and theorizing.

If one is interested in the field I would recommend starting with the current (and special volume) of [Cultural Anthropology](#). This volume, co-edited and co introduced by Kirksey (CUNY) and Helmreich (MIT), will become, essential reading for those researching or teaching the topic. The co-editors note in their introduction, using a conceptual framework from Agamben, that non-human organisms have moved beyond the realm of zoe, or "bare life" (i.e., killable), and into the realm of *bios*, appearing along side humans with legibly biographical and political lives - anthropologists have become "concerned with the effects of our entanglements with other kinds of selves" (Kohn, see below).

As this special volume outlines, the emergent field is vast and multispecies (or "transspecies" - see below) ethnography has produced ethnographies concerned with companion pet species (most notably Donna Harraway's *A*

Companion Species Manifesto and *When Species Meet* as well as Eduardo Kohn's seminal "How Dogs Dream: Amazonian Natures and the Politics of Transpecies Engagement," *American Ethnologist* 34(1):3-24; insects (Hugh Raffles *Insectopedia*); underwater sea life (Eva Hayward's work on "cup corals," which is a paper in the special volume; non-human primates (Agustin Fuentes - also in the special volume); viruses (Celia Lowe, again in the special volume); and mushrooms (Matusutake Worlds Research Group, and in particular, Anna Tsing (e.g., *Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species*, unpublished manuscript).

Multispecies ethnography also has an experimental component, which stimulated the formation of the first "multispecies salon" at the 2008 AAA Annual Meeting (discussed in Kirksey and Helmreich's introduction) as well as the [Multispecies Salon 3: SWARM](#) at this year's AAA meeting in New Orleans. In these events we can witness the merger of ecoart, performance art, and bioart that creates a space for anthropologists, biologists and artists that produce encounters which generate "ethnographic data and ethnographic analysis at the same time" ([Marcus](#), taken from the introduction).

Interestingly, as noted in the Special Volume introduction, anthropology has a very long history of engagement with non-human species (those interested might be picking up a copy of [Lewis Henry Morgan's The American Beaver and His Works](#)). However, this new work seems intent on interrogating, destabilizing, and literally blurring the nature-culture, or nature/culture, divide in order to craft "new genres of naturalcultural criticism." For this particular volume, the authors, and the multispecies movement in general, take aim at the concept of "species" itself (in a similar fashion to the critique of "culture" over the last 25 years).

In a subsequent Blog I will elaborate more on a specific project/case that has forced me to engage with this new ethnographic genre and practice through an already emerging 'subfield' of multispecies ethnography: ethnoprimateology. It is quite clear that multispecies ethnography has gained traction and legitimacy and will provide serious contributions (and debate) for science studies, medical anthropology, and related disciplines for years to come.

AMA citation

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