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## Critical Perspectives on Multispecies Ethnography -- A Special Issue of Critique of Anthropology

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By Aaron Seaman



The most recent issue of [Critique of Anthropology](#) is a special issue, entitled "[Critical Perspectives on Multispecies Ethnography](#)." The [introduction](#), by Alan Smart, discusses the use of "multispecies ethnography" as the designation for their enterprise, working through the implications of both words of the phrase. Along with the introduction, the five articles detailed below round out the issue:

### [Ethnoprimatology: Critical interdisciplinarity and multispecies approaches in anthropology](#)

*Nicholas Malone, Alison H. Wade, Agustín Fuentes, Erin P. Riley, Melissa Remis, and Carolyn Jost Robinson*

The emerging practice of ethnoprimatology creates an important venue for diverse epistemologies in anthropology and primatology to interact in an intellectually robust and engaged manner. At the same time that multispecies ethnographies are becoming more common in social anthropology, a subset of primatologists are immersing themselves in approaches that merge ethnographic engagement with primate studies. In these endeavors the

distinction between “human worlds” and “nature” is discarded and multispecies entanglements become central aspects of anthropogenic ecologies. By drawing from ecological, biological, ethnographic and historical approaches, ethnoprimateology creates a more robust and accurate methodology for anthropologists and primatologists interested in understanding complex systems of human–alloprimate interface in the Anthropocene. In this essay, we outline what ethnoprimateology is, how it plays out in real-world contexts, and why it is a potentially powerful tool to move past historical rifts in anthropological practice and integrate perspectives in a successful and engaged manner. Finally, we address the practical and ethical considerations of human–alloprimate engagements in both conservation and scientific contexts.

[Animal spirits and mimetic affinities: The semiotics of intimacy in African human/animal identities](#)

*John G. Galaty*

Human identities are often conceived in counter-position to objects outside the individual or the collective self with which lines of affinity or opposition, or the blurring together of both, run. Selfhood itself is forged out of the experience of “alterity” through encounters with diverse “others” with whom we identify or differentiate ourselves. With reference to the experience of East African pastoralists, this paper examines the meshing of human and animal identities, where both wild and domestic animals represent human partners and counterparts. Semiotic theories propose that there are two opposed sign functions, based on relations of contiguity and similarity. Domestic animals are “part of,” but often serve as metaphors for, pastoralist societies. Both functions describe forms of human/animal “similitudes,” via large affinities as people are seen as like, as or together with domestic animals, or via small and intimate affinities, built up through sensual experience. Sacrifice creates the ultimate intimacy, as the sacrificed animal becomes a key signifier of personal and social identities. Here, the two semiotic functions are blended to form especially powerful semiotic objects, with metonymical sources elevated to analogies identities. Livestock, then, are human metonyms that serve as especially convincing metaphors and allegories for society and personal identity. It is through relations of intimate affinity between herding peoples and their stock that the sense of what an animal is and the qualities it sensually shares with people are built up through experience and affect into memories and anticipations. Then, the nature of the beast as a set of forms, properties, ideas, and associations is elevated into

indexical images of special similitude that can assume the full weight of signifying people as individuals and collectivities and in so doing brings identities within society into being.

[Hokkaido's frontiers: Blurred embodiments, shared affects and the evolution of dairy farming's animal-human-machine](#)

*Paul Hansen*

Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido is popularly viewed as a frontier space. This stems from a pre-modern conceptualization of the island as barbaric, its contemporary image as pastoral, and the downplaying of its colonization in between. In Hokkaido, dairying is an occupation that is profoundly influenced by negotiations with modernity, regional identity and the "West". Thus, the image of the dairy industry is usually promoted through two tropes; dairy as foreign and dairy as a modern health benefit coalescing with conceptualizations of idealized foreign physical and political bodies. These perceptions link the contemporary industry to idyllic Euro-American pastoral images and imaginations. However, as in much of the northern world, Hokkaido dairy farming has rapidly industrialized. Until the 1980s Hokkaido dairy farms rarely exceeded 50 head. The norm was that members of a single farm family would intimately know their livestock through the embodied sharing of space and interaction; especially in relation to the twice daily process of milking. But, over the last generation a shift to rotary parlor milking systems has occurred. This high-tech and high-cost equipment enables the "automated" and simultaneous milking of up to 60 cattle at any given moment presided over by only four human staff whose work involves attaching suction devices and observing readouts. Such unskilled dairy workers are often not from farm families. Increasingly they are transient urban youth remaining on the job for less than a year, or international migrants with little interest in farming. This paper is based on 19 months of ethnographic and archival fieldwork and examines how the boundaries between animal, human, and technology have shifted and may further shift in Hokkaido.

[Revisiting distinctions between ranching and pastoralism: A matter of interspecies relations between livestock, people, and predators](#)

*Olivier LaRocque*

North American ranching did not evolve as a solution to the ecological contradictions of pastoralism. This has been the conventional view from an institutional perspective, but from a

perspective of interspecies relations, the reverse is more plausible. Rather than invest in careful husbandry, early colonists released livestock to fend for themselves and henceforth partook in the eradication of predators. This estrangement of livestock from the domestic sphere and the persecution of predators have lasted beyond the open range era and persist on private ranches. Range science tailored its prescriptions to the free-roaming livestock practices of ranching. But stocking rate guidelines are not sufficient to prevent the degradation of rangelands. Trophic cascade ecology has since demonstrated that the sound distribution of grazing activities takes place on a landscape of fear where nonlethal predation effects prevent the overutilization of key sites. In order to replicate these effects without undue losses, now that predators are protected, ranchers are compelled to reformulate their interspecies relations of estrangement and persecution. Technologies are a poor substitute for human presence, and ranchers are faced with adopting pastoralist practices of herding in order to improve rangelands and maintain surveillance to prevent predation. Thus by turning to pastoralist interspecies relations and practices, ranching might resolve its ecological contradictions.

[Worldviews and human–animal relations: Critical perspectives on bison–human relations among the Euro-Canadians and Blackfoot](#)

*Gerald A. Oetelaar*

Researchers generally study human–animal relations in terms of hunter–gatherers, pastoralists or urbanites but few have explored the relationship between humans and the same animal across cultures. In this paper, I examine the relationship between humans and bison in the world of Euro-Canadians and the cosmos of the Blackfoot. Although both groups perceived the bison as a valuable resource and implemented conservation strategies to ensure its survival, their respective attitudes toward this species reflected very different worldviews. To Euro-Canadians and western researchers, the bison are perceived as being a part of nature, and thus human–animal relations change in tandem with the changing perceptions of the natural environment. To the Blackfoot people, humans are part of nature as are bison, and therefore, human–animal relations involve direct interactions between sentient beings.

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