

Full programme

Heroes and Villains in the Anthropocene
a virtual seminar series
(Spring – Autumn 2021)

1–2pm GMT on Zoom

Pre-registration: candida.furber@brunel.ac.uk



7 April 2021

Love or disgust: One Butterfly, Two Worlds?

Columba Gonzalez-Duarte (Mount Saint Vincent University Halifax)

This paper explores the theme of heroes and villains in the context of conserving the North American monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*). The monarch butterfly is a migratory insect that travels across Canada, The United States and Mexico, performing a 4000-km migration. By completing this migration, the at-risk insect connects and disconnects humans, revealing tensions of a North/South dichotomy across geographies and the different actors participating in the insect's survival. In the 'North,' the conservation strategy relies on the voluntary work of 'butterfly amateurs' who recreate monarch habitat, rear the insect at home, and often contribute economically and affectively to habitat protection. In the 'South,' the conservation model is experienced as a top-down imposition restricting land use and traditional livelihoods; these are people who suffer and contest nature-trespassers' labels and carry the political weight of conserving a disappearing insect. Based on ethnographic data collected with these two often opposed conservation communities, I explore the heroes' and villains' dynamic around ontological questions. What happens when actors co-living with the same organism have radically opposed ideas of what a butterfly is or the form it should live? My exploration of *one insect, two worlds* intersects with the 'many worlds' and one planet debate (Viveros de Castro 2014; Abramson and Holbraad 2014, recently Latour's [biennial exhibit](#)) in a postcolonial context (Todd 2016). In this way, by exploring the tension of these opposed yet co-produced communities, the paper explores how a disappearing butterfly confronts essential perceptions of nature in a moment of unquestionable crisis.

Abramson, Allen, and Martin Holbraad, eds. 2014. *Framing Cosmologies: The Anthropology of Worlds*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Todd, Zoe. 2016. "An Indigenous Feminist's Take On The Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word For Colonialism: An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn." *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29 (1): 4-22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12124>.

Viveros de Castro, Eduardo Batalha Viveiros de. 2014. *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology*. Edited by Peter Skafish. First edition. Univocal. Minneapolis, MN: Univocal.

Columba Gonzalez-Duarte holds a Ph.D. in sociocultural anthropology at the University of Toronto with a joint degree at the School of Environment. After graduation in 2019, Dr. Gonzalez-Duarte gained a post-doctoral fellowship at the Department of Geography and Planning of the University of Toronto and the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity. She recently started a position as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at

Mount Saint Vincent University, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Her research interests are related to monarch butterfly tri-national conservation dynamics exploring the connections between NAFTA's agri-food industry, labour migration, and monarch decline. She has also worked with scientific and Indigenous communities that co-habit with this butterfly across Canada, the United States and Mexico documenting their knowledge and forms relating to the migratory insect. Columba is currently working on her research project, "*Convergent Migrations*," and finishing a book based on her doctoral research.

28 April 2021

On Parasites and Commensals. Stories of Ambivalent Potato Companionships across Anthropocene Spaces and Times

Olivia Angé (Université libre de Bruxelles)

This talk presents stories of potato-human companionship in four disparate ecological settings. They are selected to give sense of contrasted tuberous historical protagonism, outlining shifting anthropocene figures of parasites and commensals. First, I delve into Andean stories accounting for potato strategic contribution to the expansion of the Inca empire, and to the resistance against colonial invasion. Secondly, I follow potato journey towards the old world, to highlight the vital participation of *Tuberosum* species to the Industrial Revolution; and their subsequent deadly devastation when the proliferation of *Phytophthora infestans* across north European monocrop fields provoked a tragic famine. The third story brings us back to the Andean centre of domestication, where a Potato Park was settled at the turn of the 21st century to implement tuberous agrobiodiversity conservation campaigns. Curating more than 1300 native varieties, local cultivators have become internationally renowned conservation heroes; while still being stigmatised as wretched Indians in other contexts. The fourth scene unfolds in East Africa, where agribusiness magnates are working to release a late blight resistant cisgenic variant of the South American Victoria variety; raising accusations of biopiracy and ecological menace. All in all, these transhistorical vignettes of tuberous heroism and villainy revisit recent scholarship about the creation of moral examples, in light of a multispecies ethnography.

Olivia Angé is an Associate Professor at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, and the principal investigator of the ERC Starting Grant *Flourishing Seeds*. She specialises in the study of economic exchanges, agriculture and prosperity in the Andes. Since 2014 she has been doing research on potato agrobiodiversity in Peru. She has also performed extensive fieldwork on barter fairs in the Argentinean cordillera. She is the author of *Barter and Social Regeneration in the Argentinean Andes* (Berghahn, 2018), and co-editor of *Ecological Nostalgias* and *Anthropology and Nostalgia* (Berghahn, 2014 and 2021).

19 May 2021

Indigenous Peoples and their Role as “Bearers of Hope” in the Anthropocene: Critical Reflections from Indonesian Borneo

Michaela Haug (University of Cologne)

Current debates around the Anthropocene emphasise the close interconnections between humans and all other beings on this planet. They reflect the notion that the ecological crisis largely stems from a globally dominant, “Western” or “modern” worldview, while stimulating a renewed interest in indigenous conceptualisations of the world (Knauß 2018, Sprenger *forthcoming*). In a context, where the desire for alternative ways of relating to the world is omnipresent, as for example mirrored by the recent works of Donna Haraway (2016) and Anna Tsing (2015), indigenous cosmologies are looked at in a hopeful light, echoing romanticized representations of indigenous peoples as natural born environmentalists. Their “non-modern”, “non-Western” or “animist” ways of relating to the world are seen as possessing a “radical alterity” that contains transformative potential (Hage 2015, Wergin 2018). Building on my long term fieldwork among the Dayak Benuaq, an indigenous group of Indonesian Borneo, I critically reflect on this role of indigenous peoples as “bearers of hope” in the Anthropocene. I foreground the great ambiguity with which individuals and communities perceive, cause, and resist environmental change. Demonstrating the Dayak Benuaq's multi-layered relationship to the forest, I leave the common dichotomy between a “modern” and an “animist” worldview behind and show how Dayak Benuaq practices of engaging with the forest differ depending on the situation and reflect different ontological assumptions. I conclude my talk by reflecting on the “transformative potential” that can emerge from indigenous conceptualisations of the world, especially where we do not suspect it and when we see them not as blueprints for developing socio-ecological alternatives that will save us from ecological collapse, but as an encouragement to follow genuinely new paths.

Hage, G. 2015. *Alter-Politics: Critical Anthropology and the Radical Imagination*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.

Haraway, D. J. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University.

Knauß, S. 2018. Conceptualizing Human Stewardship in the Anthropocene: The Rights of Nature in Ecuador, New Zealand and India. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 31: 703-722.

Sprenger, G. *forthcoming*. Can Animism Save the World? Reflections on Personhood and Complexity in the Ecological Crisis. *Sociologus*.

Tsing, A. L. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Wergin, C. 2018. Collaborations of Biocultural Hope: Community Science against Industrialisation in Northwest Australia. *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 83 (3): 455-472.

Michaela Haug is Assistant Professor at the Department for Social and Cultural Anthropology and Senior Researcher at the Global South Studies Centre at the University of Cologne, Germany. She focuses on environmental anthropology, rural transformations, social inequality, and gender relations with a regional focus on Southeast Asia. Her current research project *Future-Making, Environmental Change and Socio-economic Transformations in East Kalimantan, Indonesia* explores how different and partly contradicting visions of the future affect forest use changes in Indonesian Borneo. Recent publications include the article *Claiming Rights to the Forest in East Kalimantan: Challenging Power and Presenting Culture*, published in SOJOURN (2018), a Special Issue on *Translating Climate Change: Anthropology and the Travelling Idea of Climate Change* in Sociologus, co-edited together with Sara de Wit and Arno Pascht (2018), and a Special Issue on *Frontier Temporalities* in Paideuma, co-edited with Kristina Großmann and Timo Kaartinen (2020).

21 July 2021

***Anthropocene atmospheric animals:
Ruminations with climate cattle***

Jonathon Turnbull, Catherine Oliver & Adam Searle
(University of Cambridge)

A young boy sings a country song whilst walking through a set filled with cut-out cows burping and farting: “so to change emissions, Burger King went on a mission, testing diets that will help reduce their farts.” In this recent advert, *Burger King* promises that by altering cattle diets – meddling with their metabolism – consumers can continue to enjoy their burgers at a lower environmental cost.

Cattle bodies have become sites of climate governance: metabolic manipulations have become a way to produce climate heroes – ‘good cows’ for the ‘good Anthropocene’ – whilst other cattle are constructed as villainous climate-destroyers whose metabolic processes are undesirable and unsuited for Anthropocene agriculture.

Attention to metabolism unites seemingly disparate geographical scales - the molecular and the planetary - in which bovine metabolisms have become the site at which the climate itself is engineered. In this seminar, we draw on expert interviews and media and scientific discourse analyses to understand how cattle overflow the Anthropocene hero/villain binary. In addition to altering cattle diets, we explore how recent advances in synthetic biology and gene-editing technologies aimed at reducing cattle methane emissions are foregrounding the genome as a site of climate contestation.

More-than-human metabolic and genomic experiments, we suggest, do little to challenge human exceptionalism; relying on technofix visions that fetishise underlying agro-environmental problems associated with capitalism. However, they do open avenues to consider the experiences, contestations, and negotiations of the Anthropocene at the metabolic and genomic scale.

Jonathon Turnbull a cultural and environmental geographer whose current research explores the human-animal relations and weird ecologies of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, with a focus on dogs and wolves. In addition, building on his previous research on the bovine geographies of India's sacred cattle, he writes on human-bovine relations in the Anthropocene. He also has ongoing projects investigating the live-streaming of urban peregrine falcons, human-nature relations during quarantine, and digital encounter value.

Adam Searle is a cultural and environmental geographer interested in the relationships between humans, other animals, and technologies. His recent research project concerned the cloning of extinct animals, and upcoming work focuses on the use of genetic engineering in agriculture and conservation.

Catherine Oliver is a geographer and postdoctoral researcher, currently working with ex-commercial laying hens and their keepers in London as part of the ERC-funded project *Urban Ecologies* at the Department of Geography, University of Cambridge. She completed her PhD on veganism in Britain at the University of Birmingham in 2020. Catherine is also a Royal Geographical Society Wiley Digital Archive Fellow, exploring animals as workers, collaborators, in conflicts and in mapping in the Society's archives.

29 September 2021

***Autonomy and culpability on a Malaysian plantation:
the case of the Batek***

Alice Rudge (University College London)

When attributing blame is avoided, who can be made culpable for Anthropocenic environments? Batek hunter-gatherers of Peninsula Malaysia avoid attributing culpability for perceived wrongdoings, blame is seen as an infringement of autonomy. Even when someone has done something perceived as wrong, it is said that they are 'on their own': one cannot know their intentions. The other-than-human persons of their forest are also considered autonomous - they are said to 'live on their own'. Thus, autonomy is part of multispecies co-existence.

But among Anthropocene landscapes, as many Batek turn to plantation labour, they say the oil palms that they encounter *cannot* 'live on their own'. Because they are planted they are dependent, they lack autonomy. How, then, to live, work, and act among them? Might they therefore be blamed for environmental harms?

To answer this question, this talk will explore the relationship between autonomy, dependency, and culpability. It will argue that through careful cultivation of autonomy in the face of environmental destruction, people find strategies for living in Anthropocenic realities that move beyond a quest to attribute culpability to Others. This challenges both the paradigm of the environmental hero who points the finger of blame, and the figure of the suffering, helpless victim of environmental crimes that so often pervade representations of Indigenous peoples.

Alice Rudge is a Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow in the Department of Anthropology at UCL. Her current research is on language, plants and human ethics in the Anthropocene, and she conducts long-term ethnographic fieldwork with Batek people in Peninsular Malaysia. Recent writings can be found in *American Ethnologist* and *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*.

20 October 2021

***War of the Island Kings:
Hydropower, Spirits and Ontological Crises on the Mekong***

Andrew Alan Johnson (University of California)

This year, the Mekong River forever changed, as hydropower projects in Laos and China altered the river's ebb and flow to a trickle. New floods tore through villages, followed by record lows as dam controllers closed floodgates. Entire species of fish vanished. On the bank where I have conducted research from 2015-2019, Lao-speaking Thai fishermen on the river watched as their livelihoods drastically changed.

But what could be done? Fishermen retaliated with protests and public awareness campaigns where such political actions were possible, but they also marshalled older allies on the Mekong: spirits of islands and river features that had historically been guarantors of progress. But as animist "island kings" were called upon to advocate for an end to reckless hydropower projects, their role shifted - some mediums echoed the despair felt by their devotees, others sent curses to the dam controllers, others stonily echoed bureaucratic talking points, others gave up the trade or changed their retinue of spirits entirely.

Here, via looking at the Anthropocene through the lens of Thai-Lao spirit practices, I argue that the Anthropocene becomes a crisis that extends across epistemological horizons, impacting not only ecology and economy, but cosmology and ontology as well.

Andrew Alan Johnson is a Visiting Scholar at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of California-Berkeley. He has previously served as an Assistant Professor at Yale-NUS College and at Princeton University and received his Ph.D. from Cornell in May of 2010. His research looks at how individuals reshape their worlds in the wake of economic and environmental disaster. He has two books - *Ghosts of the New City* (2014), a study of abandoned buildings as a crisis of urbanity in Chiang Mai, and *Mekong Dreaming* (2020), a look at how dams across the main stream of the Mekong River reconfigures how fishermen live with fish, the great river itself, international migrant labour, and the spirits of the river.

10 November 2021

***In search for fire villains:
blame and wilful blindness in Indonesia's peatlands***

Viola Schreer (Brunel University London)

This paper explores how Bornean villagers experience and engage with peatland fires that haunt the island almost every year, causing regional air pollution, detrimental health effects, tremendous economic costs, and environmental impact on a global scale. In the midst of choking, noxious “haze”, the search for fire villains (*penjahat Karhutla*) takes centre stage: Who or what caused the blaze? Blame and speculation proliferate.

Examining local and international fire discourses, I ask what Anthropocenic ideas are mobilized to establish causation, attribute blame, and identify fire figures (*Feuergestalten*)? As I will show, for villagers living with recurrent fires the Anthropocenic reasoning adopted by governments, media, and non-governmental organisations have little meaning, but the fires and their politics raise much more concrete concerns about food security, land tenure, and culpability. In the face of serious livelihood pressures and imminent criminalisation, the claims of governments and NGOs can only be contested, fragmented, and even ignored to confront blame and accusation. In Indonesia's peatlands, wilful blindness has become a means to live in and with an Anthropocenic reality and relate to its forces.

By exploring how Bornean villagers engage with an Anthropocenic formation, its discourses, knowledge, and politics, this paper not only reveals the disparities within the fire nexus, but provides much-needed empirical grounding of the Anthropocene and its diverse effects.

Viola Schreer is a postdoc researcher at the Department of Anthropology at Brunel University London. Her main research interests are human-environment relations, livelihoods, hope, development, and conservation with an ethnographic focus on Borneo. As part of the ERC project *Refiguring Conservation in/for 'the Anthropocene': The Global Lives of the Orangutan*, she currently studies a community conservation scheme in Indonesian Borneo to explore the manifold ways, in which Anthropocenic phenomena are experienced, conceptualized, and negotiated by the projects diverse actors. Recent publications can be found in *Ethnos* and *People & Nature*.

1 December 2021

Tibetan Medicine, Conservation and Covid-19 in the Anthropocene: Diagnosing the Spiritual Revenge of Nature?

Jan van der Valk (University of Vienna)

During the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Asia, Tibetan medicine (Sowa Rigpa) rapidly emerged as a key interface through which practitioners and patients of Tibetan, Himalayan and diasporic communities interpreted and responded to the origins and spread of the virus. Apart from a host of preventative, protective and curative measures – ranging from mantras and amulets to multi-compound pills – the root causes for Covid’s sudden appearance and devastation were also framed through the interrelated lenses of Tibetan medical etiology, Buddhist morality and indigenous conceptions of spiritual ecology. Drawing on idioms of contagion, spirit provocation and karmic retribution, Tibetan physician-scholars highlight the correspondence between moral and environmental pollution in a “degenerate age” (Sanskrit: *kaliyuga*) characterized by natural calamities, epidemics, and apocalyptic societal collapse, evoking a kind of revenge of nature instigated by angered protectors of the Sky and the Earth. In this paper, I analyze this diagnostic narrative from the perspective of Max Haiven’s (2020) *Revenge Capitalism: The Ghosts of Empire, the Demons of Capital, and the Settling of Unpayable Debts*. I aim to evaluate the ways in which the moral ecological vengeance introduced above (re)distributes blame and agency, and to what extent it may constitute a productive critique of and mobilizing force within the anthropocene.

Jan van der Valk is a scholar-practitioner trained in the fields of biology, ethnobotany, anthropology, and Tibetan Studies. Since his doctoral dissertation (University of Kent, 2017), Jan has mainly focused on the techniques and material processes that transform natural substances into Tibetan medical formulas by working with pharmacy experts in India and Nepal. He is currently a postdoctoral researcher in the project "Potent Substances in Sowa Rigpa and Buddhist Rituals" at University of Vienna (<https://www.univie.ac.at/potent-substances/>).