The Politics of Nature in the Anthropocene: Anthropology as Natural History

Lecturer: Associate Professor Andrew S. Mathews
University of California, Santa Cruz, USA

Main discipline: Environmental Anthropology, Environment and Climate, Social Anthropology

Dates: 31 July - 4 August 2017
Course Credits: 10 pts (ECTS)
Limitation: 25 participants

Objectives
The concept of the Anthropocene has become of concern to many anthropologists over the last few years, as we wrestle with our contemporary predicament, where all ecosystems have been impacted by human actions. A slew of scholars has rushed to argue that this is properly called the ‘Capitalocene’, the ‘Chthulhucene’, the ‘Plantationocene’, or some other preferred term. Rather than try to answer what the Anthropocene is or what we might best call it, this course focuses on the transformations that thinking and working on the Anthropocene are having upon anthropology, and how it affects our capacity to study time, language, materiality, and power.

This course offers a proposition, that in the Anthropocene, a reinvigorated practice of natural history that departs from particular landscapes, can help us make better sense of states, capitalist supply chains or global climate change models. Anthropology as natural history is a practice of speculative empiricism, of wondering and of paying attention to more than human relations. Natural history asks us to experiment with our methods, perhaps through drawing, through focusing our attention on multiple temporalities, or upon new forms of storytelling. One goal of this course is to think carefully and playfully about the methods that might come from taking the post-humanities seriously.
This course is not solely for environmental anthropologists then, but rather, it explores what anthropology looks like when some cherished categories and methods are no longer sufficient.

- What happens when the division between the secular and the non-secular comes undone?
- What can the post humanities say to scholarship on capitalism and the state?
- How can anthropologists and natural scientists work together when they recognize the commonalities between their projects of noticing and describing particular landscapes, but at the cost of relinquishing beloved disciplinary boundaries?
- What does this mean for our understanding of language when matter presses itself upon our imaginations, compelling us to tell certain stories?
- What other forms of description might we engage in, and what forms of accountability does this produce?

The Anthropocene poses particularly sharp problems for linking pasts and futures. How are we to link the long time scales of geology and soil formation, the temporalities of trees and forests, and the times of daily life and practical politics? Across the course we will think about how temporalities get done, through practices of storytelling and of linking material objects or landscapes with these stories. Perhaps ethnography can be understood as a practice of straddling multiple temporalities and of building time machines. In recent years, anthropologists have engaged in intense conversation with scholars of science and technology studies (STS). Much of this body of work has been concerned with more or less stable facts and objects that emerge from laboratories. How does this tradition work when it confronts the kinds of partial knowing that emerge through engagements with landscape or with what we learn from studies of earth systems and climate change models?

**A note on preparation for this seminar**

I expect to lecture for about half of each seminar, followed by active discussion of key concepts that emerge from the readings. You will be expected to have read all of the materials for each class, and to have formulated two questions for every class session, perhaps in relation to your own research. I will expect each student to share their questions with the group, as a starting point to discussion. Please don’t feel intimidated by this requirement, these questions are not about showing how much you know, but about helping us notice the key difficulties or opportunities that a concept can open up. On the final day of class, students will informally present the topic/ideas of their final paper, if possible drawing upon or responding to material from this class.
Essential Books


Articles

All articles will be made available as pdf files / compendiums.

COURSE OUTLINE

Monday July 31

Morning: The Problem of the Anthropocene. When did it happen, what do we call it?


Afternoon: Literary Forms for Disaster and Deep Time. Telling Stories with multiple temporalities and multiple actors.

Tuesday August 1

Morning: From Phenomenology to Landscape Stories and More than Human Histories


Afternoon: Relationality, Abduction, Transduction and Form. How we come into relations, and how we might show this.

- Mathews: On Drawing and Plant Form.

Of Interest:

Wednesday August 2

**Morning:** Anthropology as Reimagined Natural History: Landscape Patterns, Patches, and Indeterminacy.

- Tsing. *Mushroom at the End of the World* pp. 151-327

**Afternoon:** On Sensing Spirits and Doing Magic When the World is Indeterminate

Thursday August 3

Morning: Natural History of States, Economies, Affects

- Tsing. *Mushroom* 71-135

Afternoon: Earth Systems Models, Complexity, and Indeterminacy.


Of Interest:

Friday August 4


Afternoon: Anthropocene Politics


The lecturer
Andrew S. Mathews is Associate Professor at the Anthropology Department, University of California, Santa Cruz, USA.