



Anthropology Book Forum

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CASPER BRUUN JENSEN & ATSURO MORITA, eds. 2019. *Multiple Nature-Cultures, Diverse Anthropologies*. New York: Berghahn Books. ISBN: 9781789205398

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The eight chapters in this volume trace their shared origins to a panel convened by Casper Bruun Jensen and Atsuro Morita at the joint 50th Anniversary Conference of the Japanese Society of Cultural Anthropology (JASCA) and Congress of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) held in Chiba, Japan in May 2014. Having attended this conference myself as a PhD student, *Multiple Nature-Cultures, Diverse Anthropologies* is a welcome distillation of several panels' stimulating discussions on nature and the ontological turn.

The Introduction by Jensen and Morita frame the volume's key themes: the diverse forms relations between nature and culture take around the world, and how these multiple "nature-cultures" have been studied. The editors highlight how "minor" and "major" anthropological traditions have influenced, challenged, and become entangled with one another around such questions, recently culminating in the 21st century, multidisciplinary ontological turn within anthropology and Science and Technology Studies (STS). Jensen and Morita notably insist this cross-pollination is not new: citing examples from Japan and the introduction of novel concepts imported from French social theory – such as "nature" and the "social" – we find that such conceptual frictions (Tsing 2005) generated new terms and concepts as early as the 20th century, when the first Japanese equivocation to Western "nature," *shizen*, first appeared. With this vivid example, readers are primed to journey through intersecting anthropological, philosophical, and scientific traditions, and the new configurations of nature, culture, and modernity they generate, in the following chapters.

In Chapter 1, Marilyn Strathern calls for a re-examination of the very notion of relations, showing how Euro-American 17th century philosophy and science (biology, naturalism, genetics) led to transformations in understandings of kinship, in particular the shift to viewing entities as having external relations. This new understanding of kinship, Strathern argues, naturalized the Western ontological separation between nature and culture; indeed, the very emergence of terms and concepts like “identity” and “relation” may have also helped naturalize relations between entities as primarily external, obscuring possible internal connections, or relations inseparable from identity. In Chapter 2, Naoki Kasuga compares time as conceived in the Fijian Viti Kabani (Fiji Company) native movement and truth claims in physics, to show how ontologies of time are central to the production of past, present, and future realities. Blending ethnography of the Viti Kabani temporality known as “His Time,” or “New Time” – predictions made by the movement’s leader who died in 1946 – and a deep understanding of theoretical physics, Kasuga shows how temporal symmetry, consistency, and universality can be achieved through experimental, or alternative, ontologies of time. In doing so, Kasuga reveals fascinating possibilities for thinking with and beyond the limits of our ontological boundaries, and how different disciplines (anthropology, physics) might productively challenge each other.

Chapters 3 and 4 continue the conversation between anthropology and the natural sciences, specifically the production of evidence in environmental science. In Chapter 3, Martin Skrydstrup examines how different understandings of nature can co-exist within the production of scientific knowledge. Skrydstrup’s ethnography of a Greenlandic ice drilling research station reveals how climatologists operated within a naturalist cosmology while *also* enacting a reflective layer of multiple natures (“versions” versus “layers” of nature) (p. 50). Skrydstrup’s chapter highlights not only how proof is produced in the service of a “new nature” for “the global politics of the anthropocene” (p. 61), but how acknowledging scientific conceptions of multiple nature could shift relations between anthropologists and scientific interlocutors in exciting directions. Antonia Walford also examines scientific practices and practitioners in Chapter 4. Focusing on the work of scientists and technicians at the Large-Scale Biosphere Experiment in Amazonia (LBA), whose aim is to gather data on the role of the Amazon forest in the global carbon cycle, Walford’s study centers “raw data” by exploring not only how observational scientific data is composed, but how it is “also itself a relation of sorts,” specifically the relation between what is “fact” and what is

“error” (p. 66). Walford argues that we should see relational work applied to the stabilization of data not as the establishment of facts, but establishment of specific kinds of relations – indeed, both certainty and uncertainty are forms of relationality.

Chapters 5 and 6 shift the focus to animal bodies. In Chapter 5, Heather Anne Swanson raises further questions (cf: Chapter 2) about the directly observable in anthropology. What happens when we shift our ethnographic starting point from human to more-than-human assemblages? How can we expand our understanding of what constitutes ethnography to study these? Swanson compellingly argues that the way anthropologists use the “technologies and infrastructures” (p.87) of other disciplines – such as archives, museums, and libraries – could be expanded to include scientific laboratories and tools. By “swapping a salmon scale for the old newspaper clipping” (p.88), Swanson shows there are many ways of learning about animal sociality and histories, if we are willing to experiment with the “minor methods” offered by multispecies anthropology. In Chapter 6, Kazuyoshi Sugawara further explores and theorizes the production of “animal borders” – both the boundary between humans and non-humans, and between humans and particular animals – amongst the G|ui Bushmen of the Central Kalahari Desert in Botswana. Building on Merleau-Ponty’s ([1945] 2002) notion of phenomenological positivism, Sugawara critically approaches human-animal dualism, arguing conceptions of human-animal relationships are based on worldly, bodily experience (p.100). Sugawara also highlights the work of Japanese anthropologists and primatologist Junichiro Itani (1926-2001), showing that anthropological experiments in “animal borders” are not new; rather, we find further evidence of interdisciplinary efforts to theorize beyond objectivist, naturalist binaries within “minor traditions.”

Chapters 7 and 8 round out the volume with a return to the theme of multiple ontologies. In chapter 7, Casper Bruun Jensen and Atsuro Morita trace divergent but co-existing ontologies of water infrastructure in Thailand. Following Andrew Pickering, the authors examine the entanglement of amphibious (Hindu-Buddhist and Thai agricultural) and terrestrial (Western scientific) delta ontologies and infrastructure. The authors compellingly show that Western scientific and Southeast Asian cosmological orders – different approaches to the relations between land and water – have produced the Delta as a layered infrastructural landscape, an “ontological palimpsest...part terrestrial, part amphibious, neither quite nature nor quite culture” (p. 129).

Finally, the eighth chapter by Andrew Pickering concludes the volume (there is no stand-alone conclusion). Pickering revisits the development of the ontological turn in anthropology and the need to take different worlds seriously, rather than “conjur[e] them away” as social constructivist perspectives once did (p. 135). Pickering shows how a “performative idiom” rather than a Western scientific “representational idiom” – for “representations are sharp edged things that evoke a sharp-edged nature to go along with them” (ibid.) – helps reveal the world as composed by performative, dynamic actors, “endlessly becoming in decentered and emergent dances of agency” (p. 137). Another intriguing concept offered is “islands of stability” (139), configurations where our relations to nature are reliable and regulated. Pickering notes such “islands” are not exclusive to Western science; indeed, they are central to human experience, and enacted throughout the world. Recognizing these multiple islands, we may create further space for taking other worlds seriously and reflect on our own ways of thinking and acting in modernity (145).

Overall, this slim volume covers impressive ground in just 161 pages. The editors have gathered eight highly engaging chapters, each forefronting the strengths of ethnographic methods, anthropological theory, and STS to challenge and expand our disciplinary approaches to diverse nature(s), culture(s), and ontology(ies). Several texts also provide highly accessible introductions to current conversations on these nuanced topics, which are of rapidly growing interest to scholars inside and outside the discipline of anthropology. In short, this book is a shining example of how minor anthropologies can (and have) transformed the ontological terrain of dominant traditions, in exciting and necessary ways.

Works Cited:

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Elisa Maria López received her PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Uppsala University (2021). Her doctoral research examined the production of space, society, and inequality in the Swedish Ore Fields, Sweden’s largest mining region and Indigenous Sámi reindeer herding homeland. She is currently a postdoctoral researcher at KTH Royal Institute of Technology School of Architecture in Stockholm, Sweden.



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