

Looking at the Anthropocene Through the Multispecies Prism

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I.

I was born in the desert
learned to cherish water
like it was created from tears.

I grew up hearing the legend, the lesson
of the Stone Mother who cried
enough cries to make an entire lake
from sadness. From her, we learned
what must be done and that the sacrifices
you make for your people are sacred.
We are all related
and sometimes it takes
a revolution to be awakened.

You see, the power of a single tear lies in the story.
It's birthed from feeling and following
the pain as it echoes into the canyon of grieving.
It's the path you stumble and walk
until you push and claw your way through to acceptance.
For us, stories have always been for lessons.¹

¹ Tanaya Winder, "Stone Mother": <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/five-indigenous-poets-explore-loss-and-love-their-native-lands>.

1 An Anthropological-Environmental Awareness

In recent times, the debate about the Anthropocene, and therefore around the age when humans began consistently to impact on the climate and ecosystems of the planet – as well as its hypothetical beginning – has animated academies around the world. Separately but relatively contextually to the hard sciences, the awareness of the ecological crisis has made its way into the humanities at different times, in accordance with the way in which environmental issues emerged predominantly in the related theoretical frameworks. It is possible to argue that the first considerable works of environmental history appeared in the 1980s, while ecocriticism began to emphasise its literary and cultural analysis oriented to the environment from the early 1990s onwards (Buell 1995; Solnick 2016). In particular, in anthropology, the environmental field appeared about fifty years ago, immediately after the spread of environmentalist turmoils, i.e. the movements of protest and of awareness regarding issues related to environmental protection (Dove, Carpenter 2008). In this sense, the discipline could be considered parallel to environmental philosophy, or better still ethics, in which the debate began to stand out on the global scenario from the 1970s onwards. With the rise of environmental movements and ecological paradigms in the 20th century, anthropologists too have adopted new perspectives. In this fervent scenario we witness the birth of another discipline, namely the anthropology of the crisis, which stands out in the wider background evoked by the above-mentioned coining of the not so recent definition of Anthropocene (Eriksen 2016; Boland 2013). As highlighted in the previous editorial in *Lagoonscapes*, it is safe to argue that Environmental Humanities, anthropology of the crisis and the new frontier of the study of human-environment relationships developed together and are closely related to each other indeed. In fact, when a cultural structure faces an environmental criticality it must face a series of interconnected systemic crises as well. This has meant that finally scholars of different disciplines have realised that the crisis due to the contamination and practices of extreme exploitation of nature is also affecting the life of societies at any latitude. It is therefore imperative today to study the whole dynamics that are interwoven between communities and neighbouring environments, the strategies of adaptation and resilience of the agents who operate in these subtle balances.

Alongside the ecocritical reinterpretation of world literature, be it classical or modern, calling it into question in order to rediscover the relationship between humans and environment also in a historical perspective, the importance of an ethnographic investigation in rural and indigenous contexts also emerges. This should highlight the fundamental difference between societies in which human be-

ings still live in strong interdependence with a hosting territory and those in which capitalist and exploitative dynamics have irretrievably separated these two dimensions. Ethnography within Environmental Humanities reinforces the effort to understand, for example, issues related to justice and the accessibility to natural resources and the management of common goods for various communities. The intertwining, between literature, philosophy, history, art, anthropology is also essential to understand new forms of stratification and inequality related to commodification and various aspects of the liberal economy, developing new ways of thinking about interdependencies. Environmental history, even if only relating to the last few centuries, cannot therefore avoid proposing a new critical reading of concepts and phenomena such as colonialism, capitalism, imperialism, shaping contemporary opinions on a local and global level. In other words, through a path paved with interdisciplinary interconnections, an ecological awesomeness is today consolidated. This nonetheless implies different theoretical-methodological perspectives and a constant comparison with the realities explored by ethnographic research, a new critical reflection on the practices, policies and power relations involving the themes of environmental conservation and sustainable development (Hughes 2001; Ingold 2000).

2 Towards a New ‘Cultural Biodiversity’

Perhaps the greatest achievement of current anthropological-environmental critical awareness consists in the certainty of the fundamentally cultural, social and historical feature of the category ‘nature’, and of what is commonly understood as natural’. In our first issue – see the editorial in *Lagoonscapes*, 1(1) – it was mentioned how the ‘French’ ontological turn had contributed considerably to shifting the scientific debate towards the recognition of the importance of indigenous peoples’ perspectives on the world and consequently on overcoming the dichotomy between nature and culture. Philippe Descola, in his most famous work (2005), had outlined four ontologies (animism, naturalism, totemism and analogism) capable of receiving and sharing all the cosmovisions inventoried by anthropologists. The project, however grandiose, is for many today considered outdated and not always fully acceptable, since it once again places a Western-style categorising superstructure on indigenous cultures. However, it had the undisputed merit of proposing to Western anthropology a different perspective – at the same time less presumptuous and less fragile – on the cosmovisions of otherness. In the scheme described by Descola, the Achuar of the Amazon are animists: their conception of the surrounding universe provides that all entities share the same interiority and differ according to the different exteriorities.

Furthermore, each entity observes the world from a specific perspective defining it, inserting it into a certain set of relationships. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998; 2009) defined this sort of metaphysics as “perspectivism”; but instead of understanding it as an ethno-epistemological corollary of animism, he uses it as a lever to shift reflection on the world towards the point of view of indigenous cultures, much less anthropocentric and radically ‘other’.

The historical evolution of this type of caesura comes, after all, late in the course of the development of Western thought. But the nature-culture opposition is today even more obsolete and no longer universally applicable, precisely since it lacks meaning in the multiple worlds characterising many native cultures of indigenous peoples, which perhaps the contemporary West has so far poorly understood. The ontological turn, intended here only as a starting point for new ways of thought and new studies, emphasised how modern naturalism is only one among the possible expressions of a more general structure mirroring the different perceptions of the world.

Following this intense debate, we have recently developed the project for a conference that would investigate the possible interface between sustainability, ecology, and the environment. It was interesting for us to analyse how this interface is reflected in religions, literature and folklore of the indigenous peoples of the world: in Asia, in the Americas, in Oceania. The idea consisted of highlighting the ways local cultures and ethnic and religious minority groups possibly face ecological crises and environmental challenges cutting across national, socio-political, epistemological and linguistic borders, particularly in the contemporary world. The ontological turn is once again useful, in this context, since it has also dealt with the theme of the so-called ‘multispecies ethnography’ (Goodman, Heat, Linde 2003; Ingold 2016): this approach is concerned with the inclusion, in anthropological research, of the life and death of all creatures that have too often remained on the margins of scholarly work for decades. According to this perspective, animals, insects, plants and other organisms began to appear alongside humans with construable biographical and political lives. All in all, it is honest to observe that reading of animal and plant species, atmospheric agents and the environment in a broad sense is as such an almost inevitable part of cultural anthropology. In the past, these aspects have been interpreted in various forms that have marked the history of the discipline. In other words, it is easily recognisable that in anthropology there has always been an interest in the non-human as an aspect of culture. But the growth of interest in these issues in recent decades is due precisely to the debate that has arisen around the ontological turn, in which, among other issues, the problematization of the boundaries between human and non-human, the relativisation of Western naturalism and in particular the antispeciesist issues stand out

(Fabiano, Mangiameli 2019, 8). In other words, multispecies ethnography rejects the anthropocentric paradigm and in particular does not study non-human beings for what they mean for the human perspective, but rather aims to investigate the bio-cultural relationship that the living universe weaves across the species. This latter aspect is clearly a thought, a movement, an attitude opposing to the prejudicial belief that the human species is superior to other animal or plant species: on the contrary, humans are one of the innumerable forms within the larger picture of nature, one among the different entities that struggle in the kaleidoscopic and polychromatic multiverse of the forest, or of the mountains, as they are frequently understood by indigenous peoples. But ultimately, even in the city a multispecies ethnography can be rediscovered... Nevertheless, in the larger picture of the connections between humans and non-humans, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (1993; 2004) reminds us that human nature can be seen as an interspecies relationship.

In the poster heralding the start of the conference, we observed that anthropological accounts dealing with animals, but also with other non-humans such as invasive plants and microbes, ramify across places and spaces, entangling bodies, politics, and ecologies. Multispecies ethnographers, like multisited ethnographers, follow genes, cells, and organisms across landscapes and seascapes, shaping what Bruno Latour (2004, 2006; see also Haraway 2008) has defined the “nature-culture” articulation of relations among humans and non-humans. He argues that social scientists should not decide in advance what sorts of things constitute “society” and what sorts of things constitute “nature”; instead, they should proceed as if those categories are the outcomes, not the starting points, of complex negotiations between people and objects.

For these reasons we finally asked our speakers: is it possible to declare – mentioning Eduardo Kohn (2013) – that forests think? Can mountains, forests and lakes do politics? Who is entitled to speak for non-human species? Already for its part, the ontological turn had highlighted how the implications of the debate would have had possible social and political – even more than epistemological – repercussions. However, these questions become crucial the moment they merge into more global concerns for sustainability and exploitation of the planet’s resources. Therefore rhetorics, ideologies, logics, practices and policies, languages not so much *about*, but *of* the environment – just to quote Milton Kay (1996) – are subjects of enormous importance and critical consideration by contemporary environmental ethnography.

In conclusion, we like to remember how, back in 1962, Claude Lévi-Strauss observed that the only real and great trouble for a human community, which can really prevent it from achieving its best potential, is that of being alone. But there are different ways of being alone

just as various types of isolation exist: perhaps the greatest danger nowadays is precisely that of slipping into the homologation of a single thought, of a hegemonic monoculture, without freedom of expression and realisation. Here the theme of diversity, even in an abstract, sublimated sense, becomes of crucial importance. Quoting Carlo Sini (2012, 16), if biodiversity is important, and it is important to safeguard it from a biological or naturalistic point of view, this cannot be achieved without saving also its cultural face. A sort of ‘cultural biodiversity’ and its very awareness is in conclusion at the basis of the salvation of our species. It is perhaps only in this perspective that it will be possible to glimpse the face of that *Ecce homo redux* to which Latour refers to, in a tragic and ironic way at the same time, in the work *Cosmocoloss* (Latour, Latour, Ait-Touati 2011). Based on these premises and these challenges, the international conference *Humanities, Ecocriticism and Multispecies Relations* was inaugurated in Venice in September 2020. We are therefore pleased to present below the collection of the first part of the proceedings bloomed from this dense and compelling event.

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