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Finding Agency in Nonhumans

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COMMENTS, DEBATES, REPORTS AND INTERVIEWS

Finding Agency in Nonhumans

Introduction

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In November 2020, after a year of protests against social and racial injustices, a controversial election that left the nation, and a rampaging pandemic causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands, US President-elect Joe Biden addressed the nation prior to Thanksgiving in a speech in Delaware: "I know the country has grown wary of the fight, but we need to remember, we're at war with the virus, not with one another", he declared. Uniting a nation by declaring war against an outside enemy is an old (and often effective) political strategy. However, we have to wonder: Is it possible to wage a war against a virus? Normally, we would expect that a "war" is fought between groups of humans, in modern times often represented by nation-states. Even the more abstract "war on drugs" or "war on terror" are ultimately against human enemies (drug cartels and terrorists respectively). The use of nonhumans as weapons of war, for example in germ warfare, is not unheard of, but becoming a party in a war does imply that one can intentionally act and counteract against the enemy in a way that will decide the war in favor of one of the sides. In other words, one has to have agency in order to be considered an active participant in a war. But does a virus, which most natural scientists do not even consider to be a living organism, and whose only means of "reacting" to outside pressure is the random mutation of its genome, have agency [1]?

[1] For more on the topic, see Dupré and Guttinger 2016; Crawford 2018.

As the above example illustrates, we humans are always close at hand to attribute agency to nonhumans, but as soon as we dig deeper, the notion of nonhuman agency becomes much messier. The essays collected in this special issue showcase new methodological approaches for addressing nonhuman agency in academic writing, theoretical reflections on nonhuman agency, and specific case studies of nonhuman agency. Our interdisciplinary journey through the fields of history, anthropology, and literature studies will take us to many new and unfamiliar places. We will travel with camels and herders into the deserts of Somaliland to find out who is leading whom. We will stand witness in a court of law, where the plaintiffs, the dugongs of Okinawa, are not only not present but may not even exist. Our journey takes us also to the Lofoten Islands, where the landscape itself is transformed by the presence of the "skrei" fish (Norwegian codfish), despite our researcher not seeing a single living fish on her fieldwork. We will listen to a conversation between Eriko and Pepper in a Japanese nursing home to find that the boundaries between humans and robots are breaking down. The cruelty of animal experiments is explored not in a physical space but in the realm of literature, and finally, we will learn why it might be important to give agency even to bacteria in our case study about Lyme Disease in Scotland, bringing us full circle with our opening question of whether we can wage a war against infectious agents.

How can agency be defined within a framework of multispecies ethnographies? Multispecies ethnography is often regarded as a more-than-human approach to sociocultural anthropology as it is believed that the human condition cannot be fully understood in isolation from nonhuman species. As such, the approach is primarily focused on overcoming the limitations of anthropocentric thinking and understanding the important role played by the agency of nonhuman species. Multispecies ethnography was popularized by Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich (2010), who developed an epistemological- and ecologically-focused approach to investigating the relationships between human and nonhuman species. Furthermore, several other scholars have created and advocated for more-than-human anthropological approaches to capture nonhuman agency (Kohn 2007, 2013; Helmreich 2011; Tsing 2012; Das 2013; Haraway 2014; Govindrajan 2018). For example, Eduardo Kohn (2007) proposed "an anthropology of life" based on understanding the semiotic processes that living organisms go through within their environments, as these processes are relevant to both human and nonhuman species.

Within the journal *Relations. Beyond Anthropocentrism*, two types of agency are discussed, namely human agency in human-animal relations

and nonhuman animal agency. The former type of agency is discussed in depth by Lorenzo Bertolesi (2017), who argues that animal injustice is caused by a denial of their agency and the exploitation of their vulnerability. Likewise, Stijn Bruer (2015) also condones predation without involving anthropocentric concepts like species membership or moral agency. Moreover, the famous philosopher Martha Nussbaum asserts that agency violation and physical vulnerabilities play a significant role in determining nonhuman animal injustice. Agency may thus be regarded as an ethical starting point when considering potential positive responsibilities and obligation. This promotes the protection of different species and encourages people to act. Nonetheless, the repression of the agency is also a key element in protection and encouragement from a legal perspective.

As to nonhuman animal agency, Sabrina Tonutti (2013) argues that nonhumans are often unseen, unheard, and are not considered to be "individuals". Animals typically play two key roles in daily practices and the narratives that define them. These roles are pure physicality (animals are often considered as working entities and sources of organs for dissection) and mere symbolic objects in human semiotic processes. In both roles, the individual animal is stripped of its agency. In a similar way, Serpil Oppermann (2016) point out the commonalities between posthumanism and ecocriticism. Moreover, he highlights several changes in how agency, materiality, and nature are perceived. Oppermann puts forward the notion of "posthuman ecocriticism", which aims to reconceptualize different life forms in a techno-scientific manner, ultimately blurring the boundaries between humans, nonhumans, and machines. In posthumanist approaches, the nonhuman agency is not merely considered to be a biological category, but the importance of nonhuman life and artificial intelligence is carefully considered, thus largely diminishing human exceptionalism.

Adding to this academic dialogue within the journal *Relations*, each paper published in this special issue makes a significant contribution to the exploration of agency in multispecies ethnographies, demonstrating a desire to reposition humans in such a way that nonhuman life is no longer defined merely in terms of the subordinate objectification of its cultural significance or socio-economic use. Multispecies ethnography considers all types of nonhuman lives to have their own agency, instead of blatantly ignoring or symbolically appropriating animal life. Thus, the approach is based on an understanding that all forms of nonhuman life play significant roles in the activities and worlds of humans, which means that human relationships with fauna, microbial, and synthetic life are

included in order to explore humans and other species in scientifically novel ways.

Anne Aronsson and Fynn Holm open the special issue with theoretical reflections on how far we can push the notion of nonhuman agency by applying it to social robots. This question is examined in the example of the interaction between Eriko, an elderly woman in a Japanese nursing home in Tokyo and the social robot named Pepper. Aronsson and Holm argue that robots, as their machine-learning routines grow more sophisticated, will eventually interact in such an insightful way with humans that the dichotomy between attributed and inherent nonhuman agency will become meaningless. However, in the end, the question remains: Does Pepper have agency only insofar as Eriko attributes agency to it, or should we look for a deeper form of agency, one that transcends mere outside attributions? How would an academic definition of inherent agency differ from that of our research subject, or is every rationalization of inherent agency at best not just a more sophisticated form of attributed agency? The paper concludes with the observation that rapid technological advances in the twenty-first century will see robots achieve some level of agency by contributing to human society through carving out unique roles for themselves and bonding with humans.

In the second essay, medical anthropologist Ritti Soncco has worked with *Borrelia burgdorferi*, which are microbes responsible for Lyme disease, and has investigated the potential for a microbial agency, thus providing a crucial opportunity for anthropology, medicine, and politics to assess the linguistic messmates that are made of microbes. Soncco highlights the contradiction of clinicians and researchers claiming that the bacteria have no inherent agency, but then treating them as if they do. Even more, Soncco shows that for victims of the disease, the agency of the bacteria is a given and a way to deal with the long-term implications of the situation. Therefore, microbial agency can be regarded as a powerful tool concerning the sociopolitical epidemic of Lyme disease signification that may impact patients as well as clinicians.

Human-animal agency is the topic of exploration in the next three essays by anthropologists Raphael Schwere, Marius Palz, and Nafsika Papacharalampous. Raphael Schwere takes us to circular and roofless camel enclosures in Somaliland, called *Xero*, where he examines embodied and socially embedded knowledge distributed between humans and animals, in cooperative human-camel relationships. Schwere demonstrates that human and non-human animals, along with their inanimate environment, are part of and result from their mutual interference, with such changes generated by them transforming skilled practices. Schwere

shows that human-camel cooperative tasks include nonhuman agency. To ensure cooperation, there must be human-camel sociality and intersubjectivity, with the two being able to understand and respond to one another. Cooperation is also based on empathetically acknowledging the will, as well as facilitating or not preventing the counterpart's powers or agency. To lead and drive camels and be a human herder, the cooperating partner must be able to respond, enable, and be committed. Thus, it involves distributed skills in which humans' and nonhumans' skills become merged in this practice by complementing one another.

In a similar direction, but with a more absent protagonist, strides Marius Palz, where he describes an ongoing conflict between the American military presence in Okinawa in southern Japan and the anti-military protest movement. Palz explores the risk of the regional extinction of dugongs that has significantly impacted social action. Palz examines whether agency can be identified in such processes of loss in addition to how they affect humans and nonhuman life forms, as well as whether agency is only in the hands of humans and how humans perceive extinction events or whether nonhuman beings including the last of a type of species might also be responsible. Taking Kohn's semiotics as a theoretical departure point, Palz states that all human beings are selves and are "waypoints in a semiotic process" (Kohn 2013), thus applying agency through how we interpret the world. Therefore, following Kohn, symbolic representation is only human. The existence of dugongs is evident in the recorded dugong calls that can be heard when there is no construction in the Oura and Henoko bays. Although the effect of such new signs on the conflict is not yet clear, the dugongs' agency in life's semiotic process and their effect on human forms of cultural expression are undeniable. Palz emphasizes that further research must be conducted in various fields such as cultural anthropology, classical biology, and multispecies ethnography for better understanding of nonhuman agency in terms of multispecies entanglements, how they affect legal struggles, as well as local identities of resistance.

Papacharalampous examines islanders' relationship with "skrei" (Norwegian codfish) to gain an in-depth comprehension of its agency, significance, and function in the Lofoten Islands in terms of feelings of identity-making and belonging. For this, Papacharalampous emphasizes histories, cultural imaginaries, and the revival of traditions of skrei fishing, processing, and cooking. This enables her to answer the question of the implications of such meaningful entanglements in terms of the nature of nonhumans' agency by focusing her theoretical and methodological framework on multispecies ethnography, rather than classic ethnog-

raphies and interpretations. Thus, she does not regard skrei as a mere food item to be consumed by humans but as something with cultural and symbolic value ingrained in history as well as the islanders' lives. Examining *skrei* and its resultant feeling of belonging to understand skrei's agency, Papacharalampous compares it with Kohn's notion of agency being intentional and a force using past learnings for establishing futures, questioning whether humans assign agency to "skrei" through linguistic agency in terms of how humans refer to the fish. Assessing skrei, and determining its symbolic, economic, and political life and agency, shows that the islanders can interact meaningfully with the fish, thus decentering human agency and making the idea of identity-making and cuisine a multispecies complexity.

In the final paper, animal agency is evaluated with a focus on literary animals through Thalia Field's *Experimental Animals: A Reality Fiction* (2016) by Shannon Lambert in an examination of the allocation of agency in terms of literature. Field wrote this book partially as a witness testimony that presents a collective statement through a trans-historical trial, transporting readers decades into the past. The book highlights experimentation on animals and critically examines how contemporary biomedicine has been developed. As a result of focusing on Field's text, Lambert seeks to explore how literature and its narrative structure might offer a way of encouraging readers to bear witness to and care about nonhuman suffering. The author achieves this by bringing the animal body back into the focus of the reader, thereby creating a state of "seeing feelingly", where points of connection and moments of reciprocity appear, henceforth conceiving animals no longer as objects of human gaze, but, instead, agents of the description. Field's book combines literature with science and uses both perspectives to examine the concept of nonhuman animal agency. A comprehensive elucidation of the deliberate and moral structuring devices that authors have used to promote "transspecies alliances" can help improve understanding of the contextualization of nonhuman animal agency in specific social sets including cultural, social, disciplinary, and historical structures and practices. Thus, the animal remains a mere shell for human consciousness to pass through, as Lambert shows how ethically problematic scientific experimentation tends to take away from animals the agency to respond.

In conclusion, a new genre of writing and a new mode of research have come to the fore in the social sciences and humanities. Multispecies ethnography is a platform for such interdisciplinary dialogue, as it encourages scholars to ask what happens when humans and their interspecies, multispecies, and quasi-species – for example, nonhuman animals, bacte-

ria, and social robots – become increasingly and intricately entangled in our daily lives, as our mode of being is dependent on complex entanglements with animals, ecosystems, and technology. In other words, where the classical ethnographer reduces "others to their own concepts, the philosophical approach of thought – and the human – in motion seeks to find out if, today, other possibilities of thinking the human exist or are coming into existence, possibilities that in their conceptual specificity escape the conceptual grid of our already established ways of thinking and knowing things human, that undermine their self-evidence and thereby open up new spaces of being" (Rees 2018, chapter 1, para. 36). Termed as "emergent" by anthropologist Eduardo Kohn, this is the level at which humans and nonhumans form a cognizance about one another and create methods of relating before the typical categorization and communication processes that are ingrained in linguistically and historically contingent frameworks (Descola 2014).

Human and nonhuman instances, or entanglements of both, transcend the categories that have grounded anthropology, history, and literary studies thus far and with this special issue we aim to contribute to the discourse that examines the emergence of new concepts to push beyond anthropocentrism – in our case, our goal is to examine through nonhuman agency the ways in which their emergence has reconfigured the real is mutating over time. In line with this, through our approach of conceptualizing different forms of nonhuman agency, we aim to contribute to the discussion that asks what it would take to learn to think about humans from the perspective of the *Borrelia burgdorferi* bacteria. What concepts would one have to devise to achieve this? What understandings of humans would an anthropology of social robots allow for? Or an anthropology of dugongs, of camels, or of experimental animals? As we grapple with these topics, the papers in this special issue aim to contribute to the discourse of nonhuman agency.

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