



University
of Gdańsk

Common, Disregarded, Marginalized: Exploring New Perspectives in Anthropology of Plants

Institute of Anthropology, Faculty of History, University of Gdańsk
7th May 2025

Programme:

9:00 – 9:15 Registration

9:15 – 9:30 Opening

9:30 – 10:40

Carola Von Der Dick (Online) – *Critical Diffraction of Plants in the City*

Edda Starck – *In Death I Sweetly Sing: The Plantiness of Music*

Lisanna Unt – *How do Thought Frameworks Influence a Person Relationship With Nature? Modernized Society, Cut Flowers and Multispecies Anthropology*

10:40 – 11:00 Coffee break

11:00 – 12:30

Kacper Świerk – *The tsíreri song: Euterpe precatória palm in traditions of the Matsigenka people (lowland Peru)*

Aleksandra Iczetkin – *Plants in the Amazon as entities ontologically unstable: negotiating earnings and relationships*

Anna Przytomska – *Coca leaves as a borrowed body: shared subjectivity and fluid ontology in the Andes*

Rui M SA (Online) – *Invasive Plant Species and Wildfires: Towards an Ethnography of Eco-anxiety In Portugal*

12:30 – 14:00 Lunch break

14:00 – 15:10

Małgorzata Kowalska – *Stonewort meadows*

Hilal Alkan (Online) – *Entangled movements: Migrant plants, migrant people in contemporary Germany*

Anna Zadrożna – *Rethinking possibilities for more-than-human futures with plants*

15:10 – 15:30 Coffee break

15:30 – 17:00 KEYNOTE

Eben Kirksey: *Symbiogenesis with Plants: From Hybrid Agency to Decentered Multispecies Design*

Location: Please note that this event will take place at the main university campus in Oliwa, at Wydział Historyczny Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, ul. Wita Stwosza 55, **aula 1.48**

More:



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Book of abstracts

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Critical Diffraction of Plants in the City

Carola von der Dick

Humboldt University of Berlin, Laboratory: Anthropology of Environment | Human Relations

Abstract:

Cities are multispecies environments of condensed cooperation, as well as condensed competition, where humans and nonhumans cohabit in complex entanglements, compete, or dwell seemingly side by side. These relations, in turn, shape urban infrastructures and interactions. My multimodal contribution explores human-plant negotiations of space and care that make up ‘urban nature’.

I present a series of photographs and short videos captured in various cities between 2014 and 2024 (Berlin, Buenos Aires, Calgary, Kassel, São Paulo). The juxtaposition of these diverse locations fosters a defamiliarization of what may be summarized as urban nature. Accompanying the images with text, I invite observers to reflect on the dynamic co-creation of urban nature.

In cities, humans actively engage in practices of “un-plantification,” cutting back “weeds” and controlling ruderal plants, while simultaneously creating and maintaining spaces for plants to thrive contested spaces. These practices range from expensive “green solutions,” such as vertical greenery, to small-scale DIY urban gardening initiatives on derelict land, examples of what Angelo (2021:3) describes as “the normative practice of using everyday signifiers of nature to fix problems with urbanism”.

Both plants and humans attempt (and sometimes fail) to create spaces for mutual flourishing—whether in the colonial legacies of botanical gardens that serve as recreational sites or in (temporarily) vacant lots where human care (or neglect) and plant growth intersect. The curated photographs depict ferality—the state of plants “engaged with human projects, but not in the way the makers of those projects designed” (Tsing et al. 2024:10), the expertise of ruderal plants to thrive in the smallest cracks, and more ambiguous relations, inviting us to reconsider shared urban environments.

Bio:

Carola von der Dick (HU-Berlin, USAL BsAs) is an anthropologist and artistic researcher interested in STS, multispecies ethnography, and politics of care. For her PhD thesis, she conducted fieldwork on and collaborated with children, educators and more-than-humans in Berlin primary schools, exploring human-environment relations. She studied Regional Studies Asia/Africa (B.A.) and European Ethnology (M.A.) in Berlin and Semarang, Indonesia. Before coming back to academia, she worked in agroforestry in the Northeast of Brazil. Next to her PhD, she is a member of the Laboratory: Anthropology of Environment | Human Relations (HU-Berlin) and continues to work in cultural education.

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In Death I Sweetly Sing: The Plantiness of Music

Edda Starck

University of Aberdeen

Abstract:

“Silently I lived in the woods, now in death I sweetly sing.” This phrase, etched into the backs of some 19th century violins, alludes to the instruments’ more-than-human roots, their materiality that links them to trees and forested landscapes. Violins are made from dozens of biotic parts, but particular sonic relevance is ascribed to the instrument’s top plate, made from European Spruce (*picea abies*). Despite being one of Europe’s most common tree species and seldomly considered particularly valuable, the “tonewood” spruce used for instruments is rare and precious, as only individual trees from rough mountain habitats develop the qualities that violin makers require. On an individual basis, spruce trees are hand-selected for the tonewood market through skilled assessments of their musical affordances. Based on multispecies ethnography in Alpine forests and violin making workshops, this presentation addresses the role spruce trees play in bowed string music. I will expand on the multisensory knowledges and the multispecies relations and practices that form an essential part of the art of violin making.

The entanglements of music, environment, and plants are becoming increasingly palpable as frequent and severe storms and bark beetle infestations are putting disproportionate pressure on tonewood spruce trees and their habitats. Sensitive to the precarities that people, trees, and landscapes are being thrust into as the result of overlapping socio-ecological global crises, this presentation addresses the more-than-human lives and deaths that come together within the violin.

Bio:

Edda Starck is a PhD researcher at the University of Aberdeen with an interest in environmental relations and creative practices.

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**How do Thought Frameworks Influence a Person's Relationship with Nature?
Modernized Society, Cut Flowers and Multispecies Anthropology (Bachelor thesis)**

Lisanna Unt

Tallinn University. Bachelor's degree in Anthropology, the Faculty of Humanities

Abstract:

Using cut flowers as an example, I examine two main frameworks of thought in contemporary society regarding nature: “modern” scientific thinking as in the conventional flower industry and “multispecies” holistic thinking as in “slow” floriculture. Ethnographic fieldwork is conducted with Slow Flowers Estonia founders. To understand thought frames, I mainly use Bruno Latour’s “We Have Never Been Modern” (1993), Val Plumwood's (2012) thoughts on colonized nature and main theses from multispecies anthropology.

Assessment of how thought frameworks affect our relationship with nature is conducted from two vantage points. First, investigating the impact of floriculture by five principal drivers of mass extinction (Cafaro 2015), and second, evaluating the presence of four criteria that scholars consider essential to achieving genuine sustainability (Brand 2012).

Results indicate how the cut flower industry, led by “modern” thinking, is accelerating mass extinction and is neither environmentally nor socially sustainable. On the other hand, the “slow” floriculture approach, embodying “multispecies” mindset, is both a pioneering example of genuine sustainability and a direct reducer of main drivers of mass extinction.

Interviews with Slow Flower Estonia founders highlighted how their mindset does not limit them to narrowly focus on producing flowers for economic sustainability but also focus on human-nonhuman relations and biodiversity. Their awareness of nature’s agency enables a non-anthropocentric interaction with it. New values are discovered, such as spiritual nourishment, which the “modern” approach to life cannot provide. Thus, through “multispecies” mindset, values that preserve nature emerge naturally, which in turn have good prospects for achieving genuine sustainability.

Bio:

Recently, in January 2025, I received a bachelor's degree (cum laude) in Tallinn University. I studied anthropology with a minor in environmentalism.

I'm interested in continuing my studies in the same field, concentrating in multispecies anthropology.

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The tsírerí song: Euterpe precatoria palm in traditions of the Matsigenka people (lowland Peru)

Kacper Świerk

University of Gdańsk

Abstract:

The aim of my presentation is to introduce the audience to some traditions of the Matsigenka people from the Peruvian Amazon, associated with the tsírerí palm (*Euterpe precatoria*). The main inspiration for preparing this speech has been a joking song about tsírerí (and ultimately about myself) sung by a young Matsigenka woman from Nueva Luz native community in the Lower Urubamba basin. Fruits and palm heart of *Euterpe precatoria* are eaten by the Matsigenka and that palm (or a personage bearing its name) appears in songs and myths of this ethnic group. The tsírerí, however quite important in Matsigenka subsistence and cosmology, seems to be ethnographically understudied (in context of anthropology dedicated to this Amazonian people).

Bio:

Kacper Świerk received his PhD in anthropology from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań Poland (in 2007). Currently he works at the Institute of Anthropology of the University of Gdańsk. He specializes in indigenous cultures of lowland South America. Dr Świerk conducted his fieldwork among the Matsigenka and the Wampis in the Peruvian Amazon.

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Plants in the Amazon as entities ontologically unstable: negotiating meanings and relationships

Aleksandra Iczetkin

University of Lodz, Doctoral School of Humanities UL

Abstract:

Among indigenous Amazonian communities, plants are not perceived as passive elements of the environment, but as active participants in interspecies relations, the ontological status of which may be variable, depending on the context, community needs, and place of occurrence. Consequently, the relationship between humans and plants may vary and manifest itself through healing, kinship, ritual, teaching or protective use. The aim of this research is to analyze the ontological fluidity of the indicated class of entities - plants - in the context of animism and amerindian perspectivism. An crucial aspect is examining how the semiotic meaning of the relationship between people and plants changes depending on the range of the use of plant. Drawing on ethnographic accounts of indigenous Amazonian communities, I explore how the categories of existence and meaning of plants are negotiated and established in practice. Using theoretical frameworks as posthumanism, new materialism, and ecosemiotics, I examine the ways in which plants participate in human and non-human relationships. This study contributes to broader discussions on anthropology beyond humanity, plant and relational ontology as well as on indigenous Amazonian studies. In my work, I use methods such as descriptive method, discourse analysis, and content analysis.

Bio:

I am a graduate of master's studies in ethnology and cultural anthropology at the University of Lodz. Currently, I am a 1-year PhD student in the same discipline at the Doctoral School of Humanities of the University of Lodz. My research interests focus on the relations of humans with non-humans, in particular with plants, the use of medicinal plants by Indigenous Amazonian communities, non-human anthropology, multispecies ethnography, indigenous cosmologies and ontology, medical ethnobotany, posthumanism, eco-semiotics. I am a participant in the short-term academic exchange project PROM, within which I will conduct query in the libraries of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, as well as hold scientific meetings with professors and doctors from these universities in July 2025. In my doctoral thesis, I study the relationship of the Nomatsigenga community in peruvian part of Amazon with medicinal plants and I am planning to conduct field research in the Amazon rainforest from 2026.

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Coca leaves as a borrowed body: shared subjectivity and fluid ontology in the Andes

Anna Przytomska

[No affiliation]

Abstract:

Studies on coca (*Erythroxylum coca* Lam.) in Andean studies have evolved from analyses of its significance in the Inca Empire, through research on its fate in the processes of evangelization, to contemporary studies on its use in medical and ritual practices. Coca not only remains a key element of Andean identity but also serves as an important point of reference in research on human-plant relationships in the region.

My research expands this perspective by analysing the relationship between humans and coca in the context of individual corporeality and shared subjectivity. In my presentation, I will introduce the concept of borrowed subjectivity as a form of shared agency manifested in ritual healing practices. In Andean healing systems, ritual "objects" such as coca leaves temporarily absorb the subjectivity of the patient, becoming carriers of illness or "miniatures" of their body. These objects are not passive tools but active participants in the process of diagnosis and therapy.

This perspective not only provides new analytical tools for examining diagnostic and therapeutic practices but also offers deeper insights into how relationships between humans and non-humans (plants) are shaped within Andean ontology. Subjectivity, in this view, is not an individual trait but a dynamic process, manifesting through shared vibration and interaction. Andean ontology is not static – it constantly evolves through the continuous flow of relationships and substances, where both human and non-human beings not only coexist but actively co-create each other's identities.

In my presentation, I aim to show how mechanisms of borrowed subjectivity, emerging in ritual practices involving coca, redefine the concepts of agency and corporeality in Andean ontology.

Bio:

I am a cultural anthropologist with a Ph.D. in Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology from Adam Mickiewicz University (AMU) in Poznań. Since 2010, I have conducted research in the Andes, initially in Ecuador (Chimborazo and Imbabura provinces) from 2010 to 2012, and subsequently in Peru (Cuzco region) from 2013 onward. My research focuses on traditional medicine, ritual practices, human-nonhuman relationships, personhood and the body, as well as ontological and historical anthropology, including indigenous history.

Invasive Plant Species And Wildfires: Towards An Ethnography Of Eco-anxiety In Portugal

Rui M. Sá

University of Lisbon, Portugal

Abstract:

In the territory of the Viseu Dão Lafões Intermunicipal Community (CIM VDL), in the central region of Portugal, there are important riparian galleries resulting from the various watercourses that abound in this region. Nevertheless, year after year, this region has been decimated during the summer months with wildfires that have wiped out several hectares of forest, consuming resources and directly affecting the lives of human communities. These riverside ecosystems are also suffering various impacts from invasive plant species that must be mitigated. The general aim of this paper is to discuss the socio-cultural perceptions of the inhabitants of these rural areas about invasive plant species and how they might be correlated with wildfires causing feelings of eco-anxiety, abandonment, despair, isolation and oblivion on the part of the Portuguese government and the European Union. It was found that acacias (*Acacia* sp.), eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus* sp.), hakeas (*Hakea* sp.) and Cortaderia (*Cortaderia selloana*) are the species mentioned as being of greatest concern. This communication will present the main reasons for this mention, as well as the intrinsic fears of the communities beyond the economic ones.

Bio:

Rui M. Sá is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the School of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon, Portugal. He holds a PhD in Anthropology with a specialization in Biological Anthropology and Ethnoecology from the Universidade Nova de Lisboa (Portugal) and the University of Cardiff in Wales, UK, with the title of Doctor Europaeus. He is also a senior researcher at CAPP- Center for Administration and Public Policies where he coordinates the research group: Communication, Culture, and Representations and the research line: ATEGINA - Environment and Anthropocenic Narratives also collaborating at the Ocean Literacy Observatory (OLO) at the Faculty of Sciences and Technology of the Universidade Nova de Lisboa. His research interests revolve around: Political Ecology and Anthropology of Natural Resources; Ethnobiology and Local and Traditional Ecological Knowledge; "Alternative" Ontologies and Epistemologies; Indigenous Peoples, Climate Change, and the Anthropocene; Conservation Anthropology; Spiritual Ecology and Plant-Human Relations. He has conducted long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Guinea-Bissau since 2007. He has around 20 scientific articles published as first author, in collaboration, or as senior author, book chapters, and a book. He has participated as a researcher in several competitive research projects funded by the European Union, USA Fish and Wildlife Service or the Portuguese Science Foundation (FCT). He has presented oral and poster communications at more than 40 scientific meetings, congresses, and conferences, including approximately 10 as a keynote or invited speaker. Currently, he is the principal investigator in the project EnviroAnth - The contribution of Environmental Anthropology and Ethnobiology to the understanding of the society in transformation.

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Stonewort meadows

Małgorzata Zofia Kowalska

Institute of Anthropology and Ethnology, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

Abstract:

My research on human-nature relationships in a Natura 2000 Special Area of Conservation in central Poland focuses on charophytes, commonly known as stoneworts, ‘neither plants nor algae’, and the meadow communities they form in clear, calcareous waters. Such extensive communities growing in freshwater benthos have long been regarded by hydrobiologists as bioindicators of a healthy ecosystem. Such habitats are therefore protected in Europe under the Habitats Directive. More importantly, the role of stoneworts in creating and sustaining such habitats has led to their recognition as key ecosystem engineers. Their characteristics and ecology have made them, as one biologist I spoke to put it, ‘a rising star in the natural sciences’. Yet they remain almost unknown outside specialist circles of naturalists and conservationists.

At first glance, stoneworts would hardly pass for ‘charismatic’ or ‘companion species’. They are submerged, subtle and easily mistaken for larger and more leafy macrophytes. They also have a distinct odour that can be described as unpleasant by most standards. Yet I myself am, to use Elizabeth Povinelli’s term, ‘drawn to’ stoneworts: mine is a ‘form of relationality that one finds oneself nurturing or caring for’ (2011: 28). More importantly, I argue that using anthropological engagement to draw attention to stoneworts in the local community can help us to challenge dominant assumptions and approaches to nature – that of its ‘backgrounding’ or instrumental use, including conservation – and explore new possible ways of relating, belonging and caring for place that are much needed in times of climate crisis and ecological collapse.

Bio:

I am an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Anthropology and Ethnology, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, where I explore the possibilities of more than human approaches to ecological research and interdisciplinary cooperation. My most recent project was funded by the National Science Centre under the title "Natura 2000 as a multispecies network of dependencies. Non-obvious relations in anthropological perspective" (2021/43/D/HS3/02018). I was a fellow of the Biodiverse Anthropocenes programme at the University of Oulu and co-founder of the interdisciplinary Research Centre for Energy and Environmental Challenges at AMU, Poznań.

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Entangled movements: Migrant plants, migrant people in contemporary Germany

Hilal Alkan

Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient

Abstract:

People and plant movements have been entangled since the dawn of history but contemporary migration has seldom been studied as a multispecies phenomenon. This paper rests on my ethnographic research (2021-2024) that delved into the experiences of Turkish migrants who have settled in Germany over the past fifty years, focusing particularly on their intimate connections with the plants they care for. In this inquiry, it is imperative to refuse seeing plants as a green background and to ask about their species-specific and/or personal affordances in generating movements, including transnational plant trafficking. In this context, where plants are cultivated only for non-commercial purposes, I identify two primary modalities of entangled movement: "moving around" and "moving together." In the "moving around" modality, plants are transported to satisfy the culinary and landscaping desires of migrants, regarded as specimens fulfilling specific needs. Conversely, the "moving together" modality highlights a deeper companionship where plants are endowed with personhood, forming intimate and personal relationships with their human caregivers. Both modalities contribute to the home-making processes of migrants, adapting and evolving over time. Additionally, I examine how migrants navigate the mobility restrictions imposed on both people and plants, often engaging in negotiations with legal frameworks and informal transborder plant trafficking. The article offers a novel perspective on the multispecies complexities inherent in human mobilities and settlement, underscoring the intricate bonds that migrants form with plants in their quest for a sense of home.

Bio:

Hilal Alkan is a senior researcher at Leibniz Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin. Her research focuses on migrant reception, provision of care and multispecies relations in displacement and migration.

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Rethinking possibilities for more-than-human futures with plants

Anna Zadrożna

University of Gdańsk

Abstract:

With an empirical focus on Gdańsk and Istanbul, this paper explores possibilities for more-than-human flourishing of contemporary cities by looking at green spaces and plants and how they are constructed and shaped through governance practices: narratives of the future present in strategic plans and legal documents; practices of care, removal, and planting; and the materiality of green spaces and plants. Both cities aim to shape their futures as 'green,' which is envisioned in their long-term strategic plans. To explore possibilities – for more-than-human flourishing, rethinking hierarchies between different living beings, and creating 'green' futures – I take the concept of the 'green city' (Zielone Miasto; Yeşil İstanbul) as a starting point for scrutinizing more-than-human futures as material realities and cultural facts. The paper is inspired by the idea that Plantocene, which positions plants as frontline climate survivors, can be an alternative to (nihilistic) Anthropocene visions of the future. The focus is on various urban plants: trees, so-called 'invasive' species, and plants commonly regarded as 'weeds.' By looking at looking at who, under what conditions, and by whom is represented in or silenced and excluded from the 'green city' plans, I examine the multiple ways in which plants are present and active in politics. I argue that possibilities are relational, tangible and sensible, emerging at the intersection of different temporalities, politics, and agentivities.

Bio:

I am an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Anthropology, University of Gdansk, where I am leading a research project on the governance of plants in urban areas (Istanbul and Gdańsk). Previously, I was an IPC-Mercator Postdoctoral Fellow at the Istanbul Policy Center, Sabancı University (Sabancı University Stiftung Mercator Initiative). I hold a Ph.D. in Social Anthropology from the University of Oslo (2021).

KEYNOTE: Symbiogenesis with Plants. From Hybrid Agency to Decentered Multispecies Design

Eben Kirksey

University of Oxford

Abstract:

Plants are masters of symbiogenesis—able to entangle strangers in new shared modes of co-existence. Desires of people are shaped by plants. The beauty of flowers, the sweet nutrients of fruits, and the mind-bending properties of psychoactive compounds influence our dreams, everyday experiences of pleasure, and joy. Like people, plants can also be selfish—resisting certain kinds of symbiotic relations and unwanted associations with thorns, toxins, and other clever tricks. This talk will survey a range of ideas from the field of multispecies studies that have been mobilized in the study of plant-human symbiogenesis. Classic ideas from Actor Network Theory will be redeployed to get beyond human exceptionalism. I will illustrate how plants do the work of *interessement*, enlisting other beings in networks, entangled relations, and emergent ecological communities. Departing from principles of human-centered-design, I will also describe practices from art worlds and conservation biology that aim to generate convivial communities with plants as companion species.

Bio

Eben Kirksey is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Oxford. He is perhaps best known for his work in multispecies ethnography—a field that situates contemporary scholarship on animals, microbes, plants, and fungi within deeply rooted traditions of environmental anthropology, continental philosophy, and the sociology of science. Duke University Press published his first two books—*Freedom in Entangled Worlds* (2012) and *Emergent Ecologies* (2015)—plus *The Multispecies Salon* (2014), a curated collection of artwork and essays. Questions related to science and social justice animate his most recent book, *The Mutant Project* (2020), which offers an insiders account of the laboratory in China that created the world's first children whose genes were edited with CRISPR-Cas9. His most recent edited collection, *The Promise of Multispecies Justice* holds open the possibility of flourishing in multispecies worlds, present and to come.

Personal website: <https://eben-kirksey.space/>