

(UN)RELATING AND (UN)LEARNING WITH MORE-THAN-HUMANS DURING ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICE

More-than-humans can affect ethnographers' experiences and research in diverse ways. Intentionally or unintentionally, animals, plants, microbes, and meteorological phenomena amongst others can impact the ways in which researchers relate to and are positioned with and amongst their interlocutors, both human and more-than-human. Furthermore, ancestral and spirit beings of various kinds can locally be considered as either welcoming researchers or denying engagement with them.

Indigenous scholars from diverse backgrounds have highlighted the importance of connectivity and relationality with the land as well as the researcher's accountability to fellow more-than-human beings (Deloria 1979; Wilson 2008; Absolon 2011). Decades ago, the role of more-than-humans received attention in methodological considerations within the emergence of the so-called affective turn (Ahmed 2004; Clough and Halley 2007; Myers 2016; Coleman 2017). Sensitivity to the more-than-human world was also advanced by examinations of the diverse ways of experiencing the world within the field of the anthropology of senses (Howes 2003).

Post-humanist, new materialism, and science and technology studies perspectives have all paved the way for examining relations beyond the human, including in relation to gender as well as technological entanglements. Scholars such as Donna Haraway (1985, 2008), Bruno Latour (1987), Karen Barad (2007), and Rosi Braidotti (2013) have been central to

these discussions, which effectively disrupted conventional Western binaries and dualisms. However, these debates have also received criticism for engaging primarily with Western notions of matter and life, with scholars calling for more nuanced understandings of the materiality and the body in discussions on more-than-human worlds in Indigenous contexts (see, e.g., Santos-Granero 2009; Todd 2016; TallBear 2017).

In an effort to better understand more-than-human subjectivity, effects, and interactions, in recent years, a notable increase in research has been witnessed within the field of more-than-human studies, including methodological discussions related to ethnographic practice (see, e.g., Lien and Pálsson 2021; Franklin 2023). Furthermore, recent multispecies studies and multispecies justice research (Tsing 2015; van Dooren et al. 2016; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. 2016; Chao et al. 2022) have shed new light on more-than-human research perspectives.

This special issue aims to deepen understandings of the interactions, negotiations, and engagements established with more-than-human actors as an integral part of the co-production of knowledge, especially in the context of ethnographic research processes. In this issue, we ask the following: In what ways do more-than-human actors enter research processes, and how can they be taken into account and related to ethically? How do more-than-human beings take part and affect

the production of knowledge in ethnographic research, and how can they possibly guide or hinder such processes? In attempting to answer these questions, we address diverse beings, such as plants, animals, microbes, and varied materials, from relational more-than-human methodological perspectives.

This special issue is based on the panel '(Un)relating and (Un)learning with More-Than-Humans during Ethnographic Practice', which was organised by the special issue editors at the 2023 Finnish Anthropological Society's conference in Rovaniemi. The contributions to this issue explore more-than-human engagements in ethnographic practice from various viewpoints beyond the human, or, rather, beyond the understanding of the human as unrelated to other beings. In particular, the pieces foreground the varied ways that encounters and communication with more-than-humans as relational embodied experiences affect the production of knowledge. In addition, the authors address the limitations of human bodies when interacting and communicating with these entities. Geographically, the contributions take us to South America, West Africa, Finland, and Tibet.

The issue comprises six peer-reviewed articles and two essays. Tayna Tagliati's article, 'Co-responding with a Parrot in Amazonia: Cosmopolitical Engagements and Ethnography', discusses ethnographic research amongst the Kayapó, and calls for a deeper understanding of more-than-human relationships in such research practices. She advocates for a methodology that respects and incorporates the voices of nonhuman participants, in this case animals specifically. Tagliati asks, 'How do we account for more-than-humans who insistently engage in the research process?' Tagliati discusses how her own field methodology evolved over the course

of her research, especially when it came to the inclusion of more-than-human beings. In particular, the skill of 'attentive patience' proved important to her work. She presents the case of her engagements with the parrot Nhôj-í, a being often present when she interviewed the local shaman. Tagliati shows how Nhôj-í's presence significantly altered the atmosphere and quality of interviews, and thus how it was able to influence the dynamics of human interactions, including by granting or denying permission for interviews. She refers to this way of making and unmaking specific political relations as 'parrolitics'. Tagliati thus emphasises the importance of recognising Nhôj-í as an interlocutor, suggesting that animals have their own voices and perspectives that should be acknowledged in the research process, from writing research notes and transcribing interviews to the analysis and theory formation.

In her contribution, 'Speaking and Singing Firmly: Beings (Un)related and (In)activated by Language in Amazonian Academic Research', Pirjo Kristiina Virtanen likewise discusses her own process of becoming a researcher and learning with other beings in Brazilian Amazonia, specifically with the Apurinã (Pupŷkary) and Manxineru nations over a period of more than two decades. Virtanen emphasises that humans are made and know in relation to other beings. In the Amazon, this is also taken seriously during interactions with plants amongst others, creating spaces for the co-creation of knowledge through the introduction of new relational bodies to knowledge production. As Virtanen notes, this is important for research practice in order to 'activate a more-than-human presence or inactivate their absence'. Virtanen also highlights the role of language, music, and dance in ethnographic knowledge formation and relation-making sensitive to different

beings. She notes, for example, how Apurinā language embodies rich knowledge of ecology and kin relations and connects people to ancestral knowledge. Many things, therefore, remain veiled when interactions take place in Portuguese. Equally, Apurinā songs are considered agents, materialising different beings, engaging in complex social relations, and thus affecting people, bodies, and social life. Virtanen thus shows how the songs presented with and around different beings represent a significant transformational tool in social, ecological, linguistic, and societal terms amongst her collaborators, contributing in particular to the revitalisation of language and land-based knowledge. Furthermore, she points out how these kinds of long-term engagements with Indigenous nations are pivotal to conducting ethically sound ethnographic research which also takes into account more-than-humans.

Monika Kujawska's article, 'Forest Cosmo-Politics and the Agency of Plants: A Case Study from the Asháninka People in Peruvian Amazonia', examines the intricate relationships between the Asháninka people and their forest environment, focusing on the agency of plants and the social dynamics involved in these interactions. Kujawska understands such agency as a part of 'forest cosmo-politics', which takes into account the diverse social relations in Indigenous lived experiences. She discusses 'walks in the forest' as a collaborative research method which fosters dialogue between the researcher, the Asháninka, and other agencies present in the forest. Specifically, Kujawska understands the walk in the forest method as not only a technique to register traditional environmental knowledge, but also as the main way to form data in dialectical conversations addressing specific research questions related to the environment. She also emphasises the importance of sensory experiences and

nonverbal communication in understanding the interactions between species, particularly those between humans and plants, which are governed by cultural norms such as respect for taboos and the principles of reciprocity. In the case of the Asháninka, the research methods employed by Kujawska produced a view of the forest as an undomesticated and possibly dangerous place. The dangerousness and illnesses caused by malevolent spirits could, however, be mitigated and cured by using either domesticated or wild-grown plants considered human allies.

Beth Conklin's article, 'Microbes and Fieldwork: Reflections towards a (Micro)biosocial Anthropology', takes us to the microbial level and explores the intersection of microbiology, identity, and ethnographic practice, using the Wari' people as a case study. Conklin critiques the conventional dismissal of biological factors in the formation of cultural identity, arguing that such views often stem from a liberal multiculturalism which seeks to avoid any connections that might be used to justify racism. To counter such views, she highlights how the Wari' view human bodies as porous and mutable, responsive to their environments and social interactions, and how such a perspective aligns with emerging insights into Western science which recognise the interdependence of bodies and their environments. This finding points to the capability of Indigenous understandings to offer valuable contributions to contemporary biological discussions. Conklin further examines the role of microbes in ethnographic fieldwork, particularly in relation to her own experiences of research amongst and with the Wari'. She underscores the significance of infectious disease risks in their environments and the necessity of acknowledging these kinds of biological realities in field research. In her conclusions, she argues for a re-evaluation of how biology and culture are conceptualised within anthropology.

Conklin suggests that viewing biology through a relational lens can enrich both scientific inquiry and cultural understanding, encouraging greater collaboration between Indigenous knowledge systems and Western scientific practices.

The article by Elina Oinas and Katriina Huttunen, 'With-nessing Bacteria', continues the exploration at the level of microbes, examining the intersection of embodied experiences and data collection in a clinical diarrhoea vaccine trial in West Africa. Oinas and Huttunen emphasise the significance of the embodied experiences of the researchers, showing how their personal health challenges and interactions with the environment influenced their analytical perspectives. Here, they use field diaries and personal reflections to describe moments where their bodily experiences—in particular, health issues—intersected with the scientific process, revealing the often-overlooked emotional and physical dimensions of conducting research. These reflections highlight that scientific inquiry is not merely an abstract endeavour, but is deeply intertwined with the lived experiences of those involved. The microbes, as more-than-humans, are necessary to consider because they affect both the research process and they underline the researchers' and research participants' views of the human being and the human body. Similar to Conklin's argument, Oinas and Huttunen advocate for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between human bodies, microbes, and data in biomedical research.

Eric Kelley's article, 'Soul Loss in the Forest of Symbols: Transformational Bodies, Avá-Guaraní Acoustemology, and Magical Mediating Methodological Instruments', takes us to audio-sensory worlds. Here, Kelley discusses ethnographic practices related to his own process of unlearning the 'boys don't cry' lessons from his youth, and related to learning

a new Indigenous way of being through musical practices—specifically singing and weeping—focused on healing. At the same time, he examines the complex interplay between identity, spirituality, and environmental change amongst the Avá-Guaraní people of Paraguay through the lens of shamanic singing practices and their adaptation to contemporary challenges. According to Kelley, the traditional beliefs and practices of the Avá-Guaraní serve as a key framework for understanding their relationship with the environment, where shamanistic songs and sound play a particularly crucial role. Kelley notes how the spirits of the forest are made present in the recordings of shamanic practices and songs, and they may, therefore, also serve as a form of resistance against the forces of modernisation and ecological destruction. This resistance takes place through acoustemological habitus transformations, which, according to Kelley, are involved in producing powerful affective responses in both individual and social bodies. These, in turn, are important for people attempting to make sense of life's uncertainties. According to Kelley, this applies equally to the Avá-Guaraní and to himself as the researcher. He discusses how, through such habitus transformations during the ethnographic process, he was able to establish a deep connection to the Avá-Guaraní community and its struggles.

In the discussion section, the essay 'The Stool: A Place for Listening to Ancestral Knowledge', by Silvio Sanches Barreto Bará, continues the exploration of auditory processes, examining the significance of the 'stool of thought' within the context of Indigenous knowledge transmission amongst the Eastern Tukanoan peoples. The stool is a symbolic and practical tool for knowledge acquisition, practiced primarily through listening. It serves as a space where individuals—in particular,

children—can engage with elders to learn and appropriate cultural concepts, thus becoming ‘activators’ of their heritage. The stool is also a metaphysical link between the human and the spirit world, portrayed as having a vital agency for producing and innovating thought, emphasising the interconnectedness of human and more-than-human lives. The stool is also important in ethnographic practice: Barreto Bará emphasises the importance of listening and engaging with ancestral knowledge through a structured methodology inspired by the traditional circle of conversation and by using the stool of thought. According to Barreto Bará, it is necessary for the researcher-son to show a genuine interest in his parents’ knowledge and to prepare semi-structured questions in the Tukanooan language. In general, he underscores the role of Indigenous methodologies in academic settings and the need for a cyclical approach to knowledge transmission.

Finally, Siran Liang’s essay, ‘How to Milk a Yak: Embodied Learning with Yaks in Practice’, explores the relationship between humans and yaks within the context of a yak herding village in Tibet. Liang argues that the process of milking yaks is not merely a demonstration of human control over animals, but, rather, a complex, mutual learning experience highlighting the agency of both species. She reflects on how her own bodily engagement, influenced by factors such as gender and physical fitness, shaped her interactions with yaks. The practice of milking revealed the embodied knowledge required for this task and the ways in which yaks respond to a human’s presence, scent, and behaviour. Liang’s essay underscores the importance of recognising the individuality of the animals, on the one hand, and the collaborative nature of the milking process, on the other. She suggests that interactions with more-than-human beings may create unexpected spaces for learning during the

ethnographic process.

Collectively, we understand these contributions as foregrounding three topics: 1) the methodologies of doing ethnography which allow a more-than-human relationality, 2) the impact of more-than-human beings on knowledge formation in ethnographic research, and 3) the ethical issues related to ethnographic practice and the more-than-human beings those may involve. Below, we will discuss each of these three topics in further detail.

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGIES THAT RECOGNISE MORE-THAN- HUMAN BEINGS

Taken together, the articles in this special issue suggest that ethnographic methodologies must evolve to recognise and actively engage with more-than-human entities. This involves a shift from traditional ethnographic methods to approaches that prioritise sensory experiences and embodied encounters. Thus, researchers need to immerse themselves in the sensory realities of their subjects, which can enhance understanding and knowledge production. As Virtanen notes, ‘My own process of knowledge production in Southwestern Amazonia cannot be separated from eating, drinking, ingesting, swallowing, smelling, and inhaling different plants and foods related to diverse social moments of sharing spaces with my interlocutors and other beings.’ For her, the interactions with various more-than-human beings have been facilitated by her research participants, who guided her through different encounters crucial to her own development as a researcher. Moreover, as Virtanen notes, such processes of sensorial engagements also require ‘unlearning and relearning’ during ethnographic practice.

The concrete practices suggested by the contributors for taking more-than-human beings into account in ethnographic research vary. First, different bodily and sensorial engagements with diverse subjects help researchers to not only pay attention to these specific beings, but to also create new intimacies and temporalities with them (see also Ikoniadou 2014; Springgay 2019). In their contributions, Virtanen and Kelley, respectively, foreground the engagement and consumption of medicinal plants together with their human interlocutors and related beings. Such plants—considered persons—are important to Indigenous Amazonians for learning, establishing, and nurturing social and communal relations, as well as for their overall wellbeing and for living well. Another research practice related to plants is the ‘walk in the forest’, discussed by Kujawska. These walks, conducted with research participants, are presented as a specific technique which facilitates the formation of ethnographic knowledge by engaging with various classes of beings in their natural environments. This technique includes the engagement of all senses to co-produce experiential knowledge. Likewise, Tagliati and Liang both describe sensitivity to animal interactions as an important means for ethnographic knowledge formation. They discuss how relations with more-than-human entities, such as parrots and yaks, respectively, can shape the research process and research outcomes in unforeseen ways. This is achieved through embodied engagement, where both species interact physically and develop a relationship based on trust and co-operation.

Second, auditory methods—be they discussing, listening, or singing—are discussed by various authors as a means to engage with more-than-human beings. One such method is language learning and interaction in Indigenous languages. As Virtanen shows in the case of

her collaborators, using Apurinã language-specific structures and concepts can link the human and more-than-human social worlds together. Music and songs can also function in this way, as Virtanen and Kelley discuss in their contributions. Songs cross boundaries between different kinds of beings and worlds and, therefore, provide knowledge which is otherwise inaccessible to the ethnographer. Furthermore, as Barreto Bará shows, listening to the knowledge of more-than-humans is essential to understanding the cosmo-political dynamics within Indigenous communities. He argues that the act of listening is a foundational component of ethnographic research amongst Indigenous peoples, allowing for the learning of ancestral knowledge and the formation of new concepts.

In particular, two of the articles focus on a third type of method: considering beings on the microbial level as important more-than-humans. Conklin as well as Oinas and Huttunen in their contributions discuss how ethnographers’ own interactions with microbes, as well as those of the communities in which research is conducted, have long been overlooked in research. Yet, they significantly affect people’s lives, either enabling or hindering the formation of research knowledge. This focusing of attention allows researchers to attune to their own experiences of co-existence with microbes, leading to more nuanced questions about how these entities are known and understood in the context of research.

Finally, most of the articles in this issue also underscore the significance of community engagement in doing research that takes more-than-humans into account. For instance, beyond individual consent, collective consent is crucial to research with Indigenous communities. More-than-humans are often part of those collectives, as demonstrated in the articles by

Virtanen, Huttunen and Oinas, Kelley, and Barreto Bará, all of whom point out using ethnographic details.

ETHNOGRAPHIC KNOWLEDGE AND MORE-THAN-HUMAN BEINGS' IMPACT ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

There are also diverse ways in which more-than-human beings can impact ethnographic knowledge production. The most drastic way lies in their role as a sort of gatekeeper to research, either by accepting or denying a researcher's presence. Such a case was discussed by Tagliati, offering a solid example of such gatekeeping. She shows how the parrot Nhôj-í played a decisive role in her research by granting access to interviewing the community's knowledge-holder. This case shows in a concrete way how relationships with more-than-humans can generate new insights and perspectives, particularly when animals are not understood simply as subjects of a study, but as active participants in the research process.

More-than-humans can also enable and facilitate the learning process. Virtanen discusses how the ethnographer's ability to learn was not considered dependent upon human actors alone, but also, for instance, on the more-than-human presences which materialised in the bodies of the singers and dancers. Bodily and sensory engagement was thus a prerequisite for forming knowledge in these instances. Along a similar vein, Kujawska notes how, during her walks in the forest, encounters with the spirits of animals or plants triggered stories and testimonies enabling an understanding of Indigenous cosmologies and the complexities of peoples' relationships with the forest. In addition, Kelley notes how interactions with nonhuman actors—namely, the use of mediating

instruments in rituals—contributed to the transformation of the researcher's habitus and thus ultimately impacted the research. Kelley reflects on how the emotional responses elicited by these interactions and the soundscapes of the rainforest shaped his understanding of cultural symbols and experiences, indicating that knowledge is co-produced in and through these relationships. Furthermore, Barreto Bará discusses how more-than-human beings are viewed as the first owners of knowledge, transmitting it through ancestral lineages to humans. He stresses that the knowledge produced through such interactions is not merely academic, but also deeply rooted in the lived experiences and cultural practices of the people. Through these learning interactions, humans become activators of more-than-human knowledge within their communities. Similarly, Liang emphasises that milking yaks is not merely an act of human dominance, but involves a long-term, reciprocal learning experience. The researcher's bodily engagement, influenced by their biosocial profile and their attunement to the more-than-visual and linguistic senses, plays a crucial role in shaping the ethnographic learning process.

Finally, Conklin foregrounds the need for the ethnographer to understand different perspectives on animacy, personhood, and more-than-humans in order to generate in-depth knowledge of Indigenous sociopolitical dynamics and ecological relationships in research. The recognition of animals, plants, and microorganisms as active participants in social life challenges traditional anthropological frameworks, allowing researchers to consider the biosocial dimensions of human experiences. Conklin, as well as Oinas and Huttunen, also highlight how microbes affect research in a rather concrete manner, specifically by causing diseases. These instances, whilst not necessarily

all that pleasant for the researcher, can open windows to people's understandings of and practices related to interaction with microbes.

ETHICAL ISSUES RELATED TO CONDUCTING RESEARCH WITH MORE-THAN-HUMAN BEINGS

The articles in this special issue emphasise the importance of engaged fieldwork from the perspective of the inclusion of more-than-human beings (see also Bubandt et al. 2025), pointing towards the significance of prolonged fieldwork grounded in ethically sound ethnographic practices. Yet, long-term ethnographic practice has continued to decline in recent decades. Ethnographic research is increasingly conducted only over short periods of time. This decline results from a variety of reasons. It may be caused by factors external to the research practice itself, such as a lack of funding or issues related to time and the ethnographer's personal life. However, it may also relate to the research practice itself, whereby even if ethnographers could conduct prolonged fieldwork in a specific place, the field itself may be complex and in transition. Nevertheless, in many cases, one can still remain connected to their interlocutors via diverse technological means. Indeed, today there are few places left which cannot be reached via satellite connections. Many researchers also feel it is unethical to impact the lives of a people through their in-person presence. Indeed, diverse communities have also become critical of the presence of researchers and of the lack of a reciprocal relevance to academic endeavours. That said, conducting research can be relevant to and essential for many communities, given that there may be many key issues they wish to address in collaboration with researchers. The

presence of researchers may be welcomed in attempts to find solutions and to develop deeper understandings, especially as the world becomes increasingly complex and life on the planet more uncertain.

In relation to the ethical elements and research involving more-than-human beings, here we foreground four points in particular. First, in order to make research ethically sustainable, the researcher must be sensitive to the agency and subjectivity of more-than-humans in the world, including seeking their consent as well as recognising their needs and intentions (Virtanen 2021). This also requires patience and, as Tagliati points out, fostering a more equitable and inclusive research environment, where all participants are valued and their contributions are recognised. In her article, Virtanen highlights how genuine bodily and sensory engagement—either in verbal or nonverbal forms—stands at the core of establishing dynamic and ethical relations with human and more-than-human beings. By contrast, the use of colonial language, foreign concepts, categorisations, and ways of addressing beings can render research an Othering practice (see Trouillot 2001).

Second, the contributions in this special issue show how conducting ethically sustainable research with more-than-human beings requires an approach that acknowledges the social dynamics and rules governing local interactions with nonhuman entities. As Kujawska and Barreto Bará discuss in their contributions, such an approach requires researchers understand and engage with principles such as kinship, respect, reciprocity, and taboos shaping relationships between humans and the broader environment. These principles are not simply symbolic, but function as ethical guidelines regulating responsibility, care, and accountability within multispecies communities. Researchers

must, therefore, navigate these relationships thoughtfully, taking care to ensure that their work contributes to the wellbeing of both human and more-than-human communities. As a relational practice, research should be grounded in ethical responsibility and mutual care, as clearly demonstrated by Siran Liang in her essay on interacting with yaks in Tibet. By situating more-than-human beings within broader local worldviews, scholars can cultivate practices that sustain the integrity of the communities—human and nonhuman alike—with which they engage.

Third, ethical considerations in research with more-than-human beings demand a deliberate recognition of the vital contributions of more-than-human knowledge to scholarly knowledge systems and, subsequently, to epistemological justice. Conklin points out how such respect and co-production of knowledge must be understood not merely as a matter of cultural sensitivity, but as an ethical, intellectual, and political imperative, particularly when attending to Indigenous understandings of what it means to be a human and their dynamic relationships with the more-than-human world. Indigenous knowledge traditions, rooted in complex ecological and relational frameworks, significantly broaden the scope of how life, health, and even biological interdependence are conceptualised. Furthermore, Conklin notes how conventional ethnographic practices have often been marked by epistemological hierarchies, and even arrogance, privileging Western scientific paradigms at the expense of other ways of knowing. This tendency reinforces hierarchical divisions in knowledge production and undermines the potential for more generative modes of inquiry. A critical response to this imbalance requires ethnographers cultivate an openness towards non-Western epistemologies and ecologies. By embracing such

pluralistic frameworks, scholarship can move towards a more equitable and respectful model of research—one that integrates cultural and biological insights in ways that acknowledge the legitimacy of multiple approaches, redistribute epistemic authority, and foster more responsible forms of knowledge-making.

Fourth and finally, as Kelley's article in particular points out, research with more-than-human beings has long-term effects, and the ethical considerations do not end when fieldwork concludes and the researcher returns home. Instead, these considerations continue as an ongoing process. Such reflections often bring the complexities of relational encounters to the surface, underscoring how ethical responsibilities extend beyond data collection and into the ways researchers live with, interpret, and represent these relationships over time. Equally significant is the role of the emotional effects of fieldwork experiences in shaping research ethics. Encounters with more-than-human beings often provoke feelings of connection, vulnerability, or even unease, and these affective dimensions influence how scholars come to understand their ethical responsibilities. Attending to the emotional resonances of research and fieldwork thus becomes a critical part of an ethical practice, one that not only acknowledges the intellectual stakes of more-than-human beings, but also recognises the profound personal, collective, and relational dimensions involved.

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