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## Introductory Note by the Editors-in-Chief

**Sten Hagberg** | Professor of Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala University

**Jörgen Hellman** | Professor of Social Anthropology, University of Gothenburg

This issue of *kritisk etnografi* – Swedish Journal of Anthropology, is a *Varia*, that is, an open issue without any specific theme. This *Varia* is a collection of four articles, and one report.

Alisse Waterston invokes her own research, and work done by other scholars, to develop an anthropological perspective on a process captured by the action word “improvising.” The article is based on her keynote address at the Swedish Anthropological Association’s 2024 conference at Uppsala University, and is a timely reflection of anthropology’s role in today’s world. Waterston argues that anthropologists rarely acknowledge the significance of their contributions because, too often, they do not see how their work combines as a larger effort to effect positive social change. She concludes, “The works of anthropologists who are participant-observers of the ways people all over the world improvise for life, those who push against convention, liberating themselves to innovate and improvise, and those who put hope to work in the pursuit of social justice towards ‘happiness’ by means of local and global activist collaboration – taken together, this work and these anthropologists reflect participation in collective struggle.”

Alf Hornborg discusses the concept of “indigeneity” and the pervasive attribution of ecological wisdom to Indigenous peoples. To do so, he reflects on the pervasive category of ‘the ecological Indian,’ its emergence, as well as its contestations and transformations over time. More specifically, Hornborg explores modern connotations of indigeneity as a precondition to Mi’kmaq engagement in environmental issues, and investigates the image of Indigenous ecological wisdom that is rooted in the historical encounter between European and Native American societies, and today is casting doubts about the sustainability of capitalist civilization.

Adelaida Caballero investigates the notion of “the African family” and the way it is articulated in regional policy and nationalistic discourse in Malabo, the Equatoguinean capital. On the basis of a dense ethnographic narrative, she looks at the quality of intergenerational relationships from the point of view of older women who live in multi-generational homes. Caballero particularly focuses on the family life of Mamá Angie, a sixty-three year-old woman of *krío* ethnicity. By means of a gender-oriented ethnographic account of the experiences, intentions, and motives of different family-members, she analyses how these members fulfilled or disavowed normative expectations of intergenerational solidarity. Caballero looks at how the position of older women in the local moral economy is shaped by the kinds of support that they were obliged to give and to receive.

Arvid Lundberg brings the reader to Jordanian politics, and intelligence services, in

order to reflect upon how and when the ethnographer might be less of an observer and more of a participant in the field. He writes about how he unwillingly got involved in the political system, which in turn put features of that system into sharper relief. In such situations, difficulties and mistrust, Lundberg argues, serve not merely as obstacles, but compel the researcher to sort out similar problems as our informants sort out, and to learn about the most effective ways to do so.

In the section entitled Perspectives, we have compiled a report with some 30 PhD theses in Social and Cultural Anthropology defended at Swedish universities between 2020 and 2024, also including abstracts of ethnographically oriented theses of neighbouring disciplines. We hope that this report may give some orientation of the present-day anthropological research landscape, and thematic interests at Swedish universities.

Since the journal was launched in August 2018 with the inaugural issue that dealt with *The Public Presence of Anthropology* (Vol 1, No 1, 2018) developed around Didier Fassin's Vega Symposium in 2016, we have worked hard to consolidate the journal's publication and dissemination. The second issue, which was a double issue, was themed *Comparative Municipal Ethnographies* (Vol 2, No 1-2, 2019), edited by Sten Hagberg, and focused on the anthropology of local politics across the world. The first issue of 2020 inquired into *The Anthropology of Wellbeing in Troubled Times* (Vol 3, No 1, 2020), and was developed around Paul Stoller's 2013 Vega Symposium. The second issue of 2020 focused on ethnographic practices in applied contexts, *Putting Swedish Anthropology to Work* (Vol 3, No 2, 2020), edited by Lisa Åkesson and Maris Boyd Gillette. Two issues were published in 2021. The first one was a *Varia* issue, and the second explored *The Social Life of Water* with Karsten Pearregaard and Paula Uimonen as guest editors. In 2022, *kritisk etnografi* was published as a double issue addressing the question, *Is Europe skilling for sustainable food?* developed by guest editors Maris Boyd Gillette and Cristina Grasseni. The first issue of 2023 was themed *The Future of Diversity*, focused on Thomas Hylland Eriksen's Vega Symposium in 2022. The second issue in 2023 was also a theme issue on *The Fear Among Us*, under the leadership of the guest editors, Anna Gustafsson and Eva-Maria Hardtmann, both anthropologists from Stockholm University. The first issue of 2024 focused on *Infrastructure and environments in late industrialism* with guest editors Chakad Ojani, Susann B. Ullberg, and Asta Vonderau.

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As Editors-in-Chief of *kritisk etnografi* – Swedish Journal of Anthropology we welcome proposals for thematic issues, individual papers, and shorter pieces from colleagues at Swedish universities and beyond. To recall, *kritisk etnografi* is a scientific, peer-reviewed, truly open access journal, free of any charges, published by the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography (SSAG).

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VARIA







# Improvising life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness: Anthropological perspectives

*Alisse Waterston* | Professor of Anthropology, City University of New York

**ABSTRACT:** This essay is based on the keynote address I presented on 25 April 2024 at SANT2024, the Swedish Anthropological Association conference on “Improvisation,” held at Uppsala University. I probe the idea of “improvisation” as it applies to understanding the human struggle to survive amid harsh conditions (improvising life), ways anthropologists are breaking free from constraints of standardised methods and means of communicating knowledge (improvising liberty), and how engaged anthropologists put knowledge to work in the effort to sustain the earth and the living things in it (improvising for the pursuit of happiness). Invoking aspects of my own work and that of other scholars, I offer an anthropological perspective on a process captured by the action word “improvising,” creating something new from what is available.

**Keywords:** improvising; exigencies; violence; writing otherwise; engaged anthropology; activism; academia

## On Improvisation

Improvisation is a provocative word that brings immediate images to mind – brings immediate images to *my* mind. I think of spontaneous composition, like what a jazz pianist does. I think of Chicago’s clever Second City performers who do “improv” – they stand up and feed off one another to make hilarious, culturally resonant comedy. I think of the early generation of stand ups, entertainers like Anne Meara and Ben Stiller who began their careers at Chicago’s Compass Players, the predecessor to Second City, and whose improv sketches touched a chord, especially with diasporic Irish and Jewish American audiences.<sup>1</sup>

I think of myself, standing in front of an audience, and know I dare *not* improvise the way those musicians and comedians do, so fearlessly. For example, I came prepared to SANT2024 having done my homework, having thought long and hard about what might be important to say about “improvisation,” the conference theme, and having stared at a blank page before tackling the composition of my remarks and appearing on stage ready with a script.

Improvisation is also a provocative *concept* that brings to mind ideas of making do, of innovating, of creating something using what is nearby, accessible. The Oxford English Dictionary backs me up on what improvisation as a word and as a concept brings to mind. The two main definitions of Improvisation are: first, composing or performing without

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<sup>1</sup> See Tony Adler on “Improvisational Theater”; clips of Stiller and Meara are available online such as the skit, “Computer Dating” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H--kLKTGzaQ>), and the skit, “Wrong Phone Number” (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=950837855768498>).

preparation; and second, the action of responding to circumstances or making do with what is available.

Responding to circumstances; making do with what is available. Is Improvisation like *bricolage*, a concept brought to anthropology by Claude Levi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* (1966)? Sociologist Jules Zhao Liu (2024: 1, 18) offers that possibility, theorising that “Bricolage stems from the innovative capacities of human beings. It helps individuals to creatively solve practical problems [...] [It] is a generative principle of regulated improvisation responding to restrictive or limited conditions [...] an adaptive change responding to exigent circumstances.” In its broadest conceptualisation, *bricolage* sounds akin to improvisation. The *bricoleur* improvises using “whatever is at hand to make do with a problem” (Liu 2024: 2, quoting Levi Strauss 1966: 21).

If we think about improvisation as *bricolage*, however, there is a problem. Even as the concept of *bricolage* has been adopted in different ways by different disciplines, a common thread across them has to do with the goal of the innovation, adaptation, improvisation. As Liu (2024: 18) puts it, “the purpose of making change is to maintain overall consistency or structural stability.” If, as Levi-Strauss seems to have posited, *bricolage* can never fully rock the deep cultural structures embedded in human collective unconscious, then the main innovative drive remains tied to the structural status quo, not to contradict or undo its core rules.

It is a bit dizzying to grasp this notion for an historical materialist like me who asks: What are the exigent circumstances to which bricoleurs seek to creatively resolve? Perhaps the devil is in the details. More on this soon.

Meanwhile, with my attention focused on the word and the ideas, I start to see the multiple ways anthropologists invoke improvisation in their research and writing, and the complications they offer towards deeper understanding based on the situations they describe. For example, Eitan Wilf, in an ethnographic study of jazz educators at a U.S. jazz music college, observes a pedagogic approach involving students *imitating improvisations*, which, at first glance, sounds like an oxymoron. Wilf (2012: 32) explains that to learn to improvise, “the students produce precise replications of the recorded improvisations of past jazz masters and then play them in synchrony with the recordings.” Moving beyond the simple notion of improvisation as performance without preparation, Wilf reveals what he calls a common “misunderstanding about the nature of improvisation” (Wilf 2012: 33). It is never a “creation *ex nihilo*” (out of nothing), he observes, but “is a recombination of previously available building blocks created by other improvisers” (Wilf 2012: 40). Wilf titles his article, “Rituals of Creativity” to capture the idea that “imitation” and “creativity” are in dialectical relationship, generating the process we call improvisation.

It is beginning to fit together. The etymology of “improvisation” comes from the Latin *improviso* or “unforeseen,” “unexpected” according to the Online Etymology Dictionary (Harper n/dA). In etymological terms, the word “improvise” is linked to the word “provide” from the Latin “*providere*” that means “to look ahead, prepare, act with foresight” (Harper n/dB). We see in these etymological connections that spontaneity and preparedness are not opposites; they are always joined in dynamic relationship. In his essay titled “Improvisation,” professor and jazz pianist R. Keith Sawyer (2008: 121), affirms this dynamic that he sees as “between the social, conventional, and ready-made in social life and the individual, creative, and emergent qualities of human existence.”

It is not difficult to recognise the improvisational in the lives and works of anthropologists. Christina Wasson (2006) sees improvisation as a pattern in the stories of eleven women navigating to land a satisfying professional position in anthropology; Katherine Metzo (2021) sees it in the processes of conducting ethnographic research. Maybe a bit idealistically, Metzo claims that anthropologists “move nimbly because knowing the rules allows us to creatively push against boundaries [...] we riff off those who came before us,” she says, “in community with those who innovate alongside us.” For her, “The core value of ethnography is to improvise – to use our mastery of our craft to build on what came before, to make sense of it, and anticipate what comes next” (Metzo 2021: 346). As for responding to circumstance or making do with what is available, ethnographer Michael Degani explains how the urban precariat in Dar es Salaam are caught “in a permanent entanglement of work and play [...] consigned to permanent improvisation [that] engenders a social freedom that, in some respects, remains indistinguishable from constraint” (Degani 2018: 475, 495). Degani takes us through the contradictions, and the traps and freedoms experienced by his interlocutors who are freelance, urban electricians in Tanzania’s largest city.

As I have worked through these words and ideas, my appreciation for “improvisation” continued to grow, becoming more and more intellectually stimulating and exciting. In the process of arriving at my script, I riffed off the connections between various words and concepts and in the company of scholars who have explored dimensions of human behaviour amid social, cultural, environmental, political, and economic conditions.

Prior to my digging into it, the word inspired me to play on the three-part phrase “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” a motto from the U.S. Declaration of Independence familiar to Americans and many people around the world. Vague as it is, the phrase nevertheless suggests a principle. As a political tagline it is ideological and propagandistic, considering the history of U.S. imperialism and colonialism. As a principle, it captures an ideal to which people might aspire but have yet to achieve. In what follows, I invoke the phrase in part ironically, and mostly to probe specific meanings of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in the present participle of the word improvisation; that is “*improvising*,” the verb tense that suggests ongoing action.

### **Improvising for life**

“For *life*”: a phrase that might get philosophers into ontological debate about what constitutes being, existence, and aliveness, and into discussion on the epistemological roots and value of the life/death dichotomy. The phrase “for *life*” might be weaponised by certain politicians as an ideological tool to contain and control women who are too often stripped of the right to make decisions over their own bodies. For the purposes of my discussion here, and, again, from my historical materialist perspective, “for *life*” suggests a future orientation, endurance over and within an expected span of time. Adding the word “improvising” indicates action so that the notion of “*improvising for life*” is to help understand the human struggle to survive amid exigent circumstances.

Degani, the urban anthropologist working in Tanzania, made the observation that ethnographers often consider the creativity of urban life as “a kind of improvisation under conditions of adversity” (Degani 2018: 480). In such analyses, improvisation, as a word and as an idea, is akin to other words and concepts familiar to and invoked by anthropologists: adaptation; resilience; and agency. Under adverse conditions, people find ways to adapt

in order to survive or manage. Their inventive strategies indicate the human capacity to be resilient – as individuals and as cultural groups; that is, they are improvisers who show strength, inventiveness, creativity and thus, the ability to sustain and endure. People are never fully the victims of the structurally harsh conditions not of their own making but in which they find themselves. “Agency” suggests the power they have to effect control and in turn, arrive at a desired outcome. Not to be interpreted as free will, agency suggests there is some space in between limitations where individuals and/or groups show resilience as they improvise towards the desired end.

There are many examples from a vast array of anthropological studies that demonstrate these processes. The notion of “human adaptation” has a long history in the discipline, and as Donald Nelson and his co-editors of a collection of essays, make clear, “the term adaptation has become ubiquitous in the environmental and climate-change literature” (Nelson 2009: 271). They refer to “human adaptation” as a field itself, and highlight works by anthropologists who document what they call “local adaptations to climate variation and change” following in the tradition of Julian Steward’s early studies of cultural ecology (Nelson, West, and Finan 2009: 271-272).

In other domains, researchers invoke the ideas of “adaptation” and “resilience” to describe responses to emergent crises. For example, the authors of an article titled “Covid Connections” identified the attributes they consider “adaptive” as actors in a local food system responded to serve the needs of vulnerable residents in North Carolina during the pandemic. The authors consider that the specific ways people re-organised to deliver food under stressful conditions indicates the system’s “strength,” “flexibility,” and “growth” that in turn has implications for strengthening what they call “food system resilience in times of crisis and stability” (O’Connell et al. 2021: 124). In another example, anthropologist Karsten Paerregaard (2021) illustrates such resilience in an article on water management and ritual practice amid climate change in the Peruvian Andes. Paerregaard also offers important mention of anthropologist Roy Rappaport’s early notions of adaptation and human agency. He appreciates Rappaport’s concern with the dynamics between human groups and their animal, manmade, and natural environments, while recognising problematic assumptions underlying the notion of “adaptation” as operating in the interest of maintaining the ecological status quo (Paerregaard 2021).

Anthropologist Franz Krause (2022) offers critical insight about assumptions underlying the notion of adaption in an article based on ethnographic research among two indigenous groups in the Canadian Arctic (2022). He argues that terms like “change” and “resilience” can be analytically and politically misleading. For example, the word “resilience,” he notes,

usually refers to the attributes of a successful socioecological system in the context of disturbances (Folke 2006), and it thus retains a reference to a stable equilibrium. In the classic sense, resilience indicates the ease or speed by which a system can regain its former functioning after a disruption (Berkes and Ross 2013). Here, resilience is a system’s ability to reorganize an equilibrium, as indicated by popular terms like bouncing back or recovery. (Krause 2022: 11)

In the essay by Nelson, West, and Finan (2009) mentioned above, they warn against imagining that “adaptations” are panacea, always at the ready to bring solution to a crisis, especially in

the face of global climate conditions. Likewise, Krause posits that “change,” if understood as in contrast with “stability,” is problematic since stability does not reflect most peoples’ worlds, their circumstances [actually] marked by “perpetual and uncertain transformations” (Krause 2022: 7). He argues that under such ongoing, precarious, unpredictable, volatile conditions, people do not simply “adapt” to bring everything back to normal, but are constantly anticipating – always on their toes – showing flexibility, and *improvising*.

In her work on the 2017 Hurricane María in Puerto Rico, anthropologist Rosa Ficek makes clear there is no panacea; instead, there is struggle, and plenty of it on multiple levels—emotional, psychological, political, economic, and more. Focused less on the notion that people had to “adapt” to the circumstances amid the hurricane and its aftermath, Ficek discusses “strategies” they use to address, first, their basic needs and subsequently, how they might act to effect systemic change in the conditions of their lives (Ficek 2018). These strategies are not pre-planned but improvisations in the face of harsh conditions.

The “environment” in Ficek’s essay is not a given with all its natural and manmade parts well-balanced and in place before a disastrous event. So too, the “environmental crisis” in Ficek’s essay is not simply a disaster that comes sweeping across suddenly to wipe out people and their homes. Yes, people rallied “to compensate, however inadequately, for what was destroyed” (Ficek 2018: 103). Yes, they developed innovative strategies to get drinkable water, power, and means of transportation and communication. Yes, those who could, showed resiliency. But their actions were not simply “adaptations” to bring everything back to normal. Many died or fell apart, revealing that the expectation of individual or cultural resiliency all too often places an unfair burden on *them*. Importantly, Ficek’s study also focuses on the details of the exigent circumstances themselves, the specific context within which the people struggle to *improvise for life*, sometimes succeeding and sometimes not.

The disaster, she argues, “exposes pre-existing problems” even as the immediate cataclysm disrupts daily life, disproportionately impacting those at the margins (Ficek 2018: 102). And the pre-existing problems, in place in Puerto Rico before the wild hurricane blew in, are centred in the violence of the island’s colonial history and the current status of its people. Poverty, racialisation and dehumanisation meet infrastructure, colonialism and the state. How are people to adapt?

Ficek (2018: 109, 111) writes, “Something like the end of the world happened in Puerto Rico [...] an entire population was left to suffer and die.” Those who survived *improvised* to live in what she calls “a permanent state of normalized emergency” (2018: 102).

Something like the end of the world is happening right now in too many places to name. We might start with a top-10 list provided by the UN-endorsed The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED): Yemen, Sudan, The Sahel, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ukraine, Myanmar, Haiti, Mexico, the United States, and of course, Palestine, which topped their January 2024 watch list (ACLED 2024a; Mehvar and Khmour 2024).

Gaza..., an entire population is being left to suffer and die. Those who remain have been improvising for 77 years to live in “a permanent state of normalised emergency.” Today there are tens of thousands dead; those left are barely surviving.

We cannot talk about the human capacity to be flexible, inventive, creative, adaptable, or improvisational, without providing a full history of the contexts within which people – grouped, categorised, described, and defined – strive to live out their lives. And that history and that context cannot be divorced from understanding differential access to power and

resources that impact the local scenes of action. The exigent circumstances must be named and fully fleshed out, no matter how difficult or painful that may be – and no matter how hard powerful political actors try to suppress history and context.

As I revised this essay, first in August 2024, the circumstances in Gaza were this: Israel is now engaged in full out genocide of the Palestinian people in Gaza. As I make final changes to this essay in January 2025, the conditions in Gaza are beyond horrific. Israel’s military assault has left nearly 47,000 Gazans dead, most civilians and the vast majority women and children. As of December 2024, an estimated 17,000 children have been killed by Israeli bombardments with help from an enormous number of U.S. weapons of mass destruction, with at least 21,000 children missing (Palestinian Centre for Human Rights 2024; Reuters 2024; UN News 2024). The deadly military action has left ruined houses, destroyed hospitals, destroyed schools and universities, slaughtered humanitarian aid workers, doctors and nurses, professors, journalists, and resulted in an estimated 1.9 million displaced people (UNRWA 2025). By March 2024, nine months ago, there was an ever-growing number among the displaced struggling with life-threatening thirst, starvation and illness. By April, death by famine had set in. The number of dead under the rubble is unknown; the number of maimed children and adults beyond comprehension.<sup>2</sup> The death and destruction continue unabated to the day of this writing (Parker, Harb, and Mahfouz 2025).

These exigent circumstances must be named and documented. There is no dearth of evidence by journalists and scholars including many anthropologists and even the American Anthropological Association’s 2015 Task Force report, that traces the long history of Palestinian displacement, housing, and land loss alongside the ever-growing number and size of Israeli settlements, horrendous restrictions on movement, suppression of freedom of speech, deprivation of academic freedom, preventable adverse health and welfare outcomes, and outright discrimination (Pérez et al 2015; among many other works, see Allen 2020; Bishara 2015; Bornstein 2003; El-Haj 2003; Halper 2008).

These exigent circumstances must be named and documented even in the face of forces that have in the past, and are now actively silencing history and context by intimidation, name calling, and the threat of McCarthyism revived. It should be obvious that to be Jewish, as I am, is not the same thing as to be aligned with the state of Israel and political Zionism although that conflation, purposefully perpetrated by powerful ideologues and endorsed by powerful nations, is fast becoming institutionalised (Waterston 2024).

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The ethnographic examples I offer on “improvising for life” suggest that much of what anthropologists seek to understand has to do with the circumstances and conditions that constrain the fulfilment of human ideals, dreams, potential, and life itself. Under such conditions, however harsh these may be, many anthropologists do name and document the exigent circumstances to which people exhibit agency, adaptation, improvisation. Under impossibly brutal conditions, I have to wonder: is it enough that anthropologists name, document, and expose the long history of domination and ongoing destruction?

If it’s not enough, what then? The next section of this essay considers some of what

<sup>2</sup> In early July, *The Lancet* published an estimate of 186,000 as the likely number of actual Gazan deaths, directly and indirectly a result of Israel’s assault on Gaza since October 8 (Khatib et al. 2024).

anthropologists have been thinking about doing, and trying to do, in an effort to undertake more than just enough.

### **Improvising as liberty**

Here, I turn to “improvising with liberty” to discuss ways anthropologists are breaking free from constraints of standardised methods and means of communicating knowledge, necessary if insufficient action in the endeavour to do more.

The academy has its rules; those of us who have spent our work lives in it, as well as those seeking a career in academia, have learnt the rules and how to follow them. Our scholarly disciplines have trained us in methods of gathering information and in analysing them. We have learnt to theorise and we have learnt a particular mode of conveying the knowledge we have acquired. I am not against this training as there is great value, of course, in learning how to acquire knowledge systematically. Yet, the academy can be a very conservative place, too often holding onto tradition for the sake of tradition, and too often requiring conformity not necessarily for the sake of learning but for the sake of reproducing what is familiar to those with the most influence within academic institutions.

At the same time, and in no small part due to the principle of academic freedom, the academy can also spawn those who break the rules. The best among the rule breakers are motivated by an interest in furthering understanding. Breakthroughs happen. Paradigm shifts happen. Going against the grain happens.

Over the past 40 years there has been a growing movement in anthropology to question the discipline’s foundational knowledge, the questions it considers important to pose, who holds the authority to represent anthropological knowledge, how that knowledge is acquired, interpreted, and represented, and what these issues have to do with systemic power dynamics in one’s field site, in academic institutions, and in the world. Given global inequities and consequent impact on local communities, those who would ignore these dynamics were and are called out for their blinders. Within the discipline, voices of feminist, Indigenous, and Black and Brown anthropologists whose writings were too often exiled from mainstream anthropology have slowly emerged from the shadows to make their mark. Not unrelated, some anthropologists began to question the discipline’s disengagement from the public sphere that marked post-World War II anthropology, at least in the United States (Kirsch 2018). They have called one another to task for failing to venture beyond the narrowest confines of the ivory tower to engage with the world.

Alongside, there has also been a major shift in how anthropologists view and value the matter of communicating anthropological knowledge through writing and other, multimodal forms, the focus of my remarks here.

These interconnected discussions have led to the current exciting moment when anthropologists are paying careful attention to experimental writing and multimodal practices that amplify narrative voices in the dissemination of knowledge, and facilitate interaction with increasingly diverse target audiences. In my view, the growing number of junior scholars experimenting with experimental, multimodal practices is a testament to the impact of these decades-long conversations, and the openings forged by those who are now senior scholars. In turn, junior scholars are showing the academic establishment the value to the discipline of these efforts (Baines and Costa 2022; Cahnmann-Taylor and Jacobsen

2024; van Roekel and Murphy 2024).<sup>3</sup>

My own work fits into these discussions and the wonderful moment. I dare say I have had a part in these conversations and in the production of works of anthropology designed to participate in public discourse on critical issues. Over the years, I have worked solo on various writing projects – experimenting and innovating – and I have worked alongside colleagues with whom I share sensibility and commitment to “writing otherwise,” Ulf Hannerz’s phrase (2016). Among them are Fran Mascia-Lees, Carole McGranahan, Fiona Murphy, Carolyn Nordstrom, Anand Pandian, Paul Stoller, Maria Vesperi, and Helena Wulff, all whose writings I find beautiful, powerful, and accessible. I am quite certain that each of them, like myself, have improvised to make way into new territory in writing anthropology.

In reflecting on my own writing process and habits, I see that my improvisations are not “creations *ex nihilo*” but rooted in the discussions I have outlined above. I have built my experiments in “writing anthropology otherwise” on a series of intellectual concerns and conversations, sociocultural formations, and political circumstances and events. I have built my writing practice sometimes by imitating authors I admire, often by consciously “knocking a host of academic critics off my shoulder.” I have also built my writing practice by following a strict, self-imposed schedule, making sure I carve out the time to write, no matter how much I may not want to!

“Knocking a host of academic critics off my shoulder” is a line from an essay by Carolyn Nordstrom (2009: 35) titled “The Bard,” and it is published in an anthology of writing I co-edited with Maria Vesperi. That book, published 16 years ago, is one among a growing number of books, articles and blogs on writing anthropology, on the writer in the anthropologist, on the anthropologist as writer, and on featuring experimental writings, some brilliant and inspiring, and some that fall flat.

In reflecting on my efforts to free myself from the real and imaginary critics on my shoulder, I early on rejected opaque academic language, which too often seemed designed to impress, intimidate, or confuse rather than to clarify. I would write differently, I promised myself, no matter what happened to me, career-wise.

Scanning my memory and the books I have written, I see the ways I broke rules for the sake of the art of writing and to express also what I needed to, in the spirit of Irma McClaurin’s understanding that as anthropologists, “We hold in our words, real people’s lives” (McClaurin 2009: 123). I remember sitting alone in my home-office to write a book of urban poverty based on my research in New York City, improvising as I crafted portraits of each of the women at the center of the study, and thus, the book. One book reviewer asked, in so many words, “Where’s the theory?” Theory was there, in what Carole McGranahan names “theoretical storytelling” (2020). In my narrative, the reader would not be hammered over the head with lofty abstractions. I titled the book, *Love, Sorrow and Rage*, three words that imply that this book would break tradition by highlighting emotions even as it conforms to the academic convention of a three-word book title! (Waterston 2009).

Many years later, artist Charlotte Corden and I improvised as we made our way to create what became the graphic novel, *Light in Dark Times* (Waterston and Corden 2020). We did not know one another prior to this project, and neither of us had ever done anything

<sup>3</sup> For some recent examples, see Creative Anthropologies Network: <https://www.easaonline.org/networks/can/>; Cool Anthropology: <https://www.coolanthropology.com/>; and Otherwise Magazine: <https://www.otherwisemag.com/magazine>.



like this before. She, the illustrator-fine artist, and I, the anthropologist-writer. After some false starts working at a distance, Charlotte left her home in the UK to live with me in New York. A lecture I had presented became the basis of the graphic novel. From there and with that material, we fumbled in the dark to imagine, create, and craft the book. We invented a process, setting up shop in my home basement, taping a long roll of art paper along four walls that became the storyboard.

In field notes I wrote during the course of our project, I hear ways “improvising” can be freeing with remarkable results. Even as I never use the word “improvisational” in these notes, it is clear that Charlotte and I gave ourselves that liberty:

We’ve been working intently and intensely. It’s an incredible experience, which I can’t explain in a short note. Some snippets might give a taste: deep diving into and discussing/deliberating/explaining each word, sentence, paragraph, figuring out meanings, imagining visual representations/the just-right image; it’s a dance; there’s disagreement and epiphany, tension and talking it all out sometimes gently, sometimes not so; there’s frustration, and great joy, an incredible intimacy/bond, a joining of the minds and hearts; a creative process like no other I have ever experienced. Age differences, generation differences, experience differences, cultural differences, belief differences; like-mindedness’s, personality similarities, ability to be utterly honest and utterly direct with one another; overcoming obstacles; ability to come out the other end all the better personally, intellectually, creatively.

I have found much is to be gained as an anthropologist who has pushed against convention. Fran Mascia-Lees’ words resonate with me when, in personal correspondence, she said that for many of us, the art of writing differently is a political act. Still, given the state of the world, it is important to again ask: is that enough?

### **Improvising for the pursuit of happiness**

Happiness suggests contentment, not pure pleasure or a constant state of joyfulness. Even as I have much contentment in my privileged, personal life, I also look onto the world and see too much preventable sorrow and grief. The artist Philip Guston asks, “The war [...] the brutality of the world. What kind of man am I, sitting at home, reading magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything – and then going into my studio to adjust a red to a blue?” (Guston 2024). Likewise, I ask myself, “The war [...] the brutality of the world. What kind of person am I, sitting at home, reading the newspapers and the ethnographies, going into a frustrated fury about everything – and then going to my computer to adjust a word or a phrase?”

In these desperate moments, I again turn to anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom, who for decades has been my muse, inspiring my work in anthropology, and even how I want to live my life. She once wrote:

We all, as humans, have a responsibility to creatively offer something to the world. Not more than one person can. Just our bit. Creativity [...] takes meaning only when it adds to the sum of our humanity. (Nordstrom 2009: 37)

If improvising is about taking creative action in response to circumstances, what is it we anthropologists are to do? According to human geographers Ian Shaw and Mary Waterstone, “Our task is to build, craft, sew, engineer, cook, fix, grow, plumb our way to more dignified worlds. This is no small task” (Shaw and Waterstone 2019: 108).

In my view, there are three aspects to “the pursuit of happiness”: First, the pursuit requires diagnosing what makes for despair, hopelessness, and destruction for individuals and for the billions of human lives “dispossessed of land, livelihoods, and dignity” (Shaw and Waterstone 2019: 2). Knowing this, in turn, informs the second aspect: what needs to be reimagined and reorganised in order to bring about joyfulness, promise, and sustenance to the earth and the living things in it? Third, given our individual talents and skills, and the forums and platforms available to us, what tasks can we take on to contribute to a more dignified world?

As scholars, we are practiced in diagnosis. Individual works and the collective body of knowledge produced by anthropologists and scholars in related disciplines, are replete with information that helps identify sources of the ills we observe in the world. The knowledge is there even if there are censors who, by benign neglect or outright suppression, try to keep it out of the public conversation.

The knowledge is there even if, too often, author-scholars use obtuse language, making it difficult to pull out the gems. Given the state of the world, there is urgency to making such knowledge accessible through our writings and other formats. This urgency is my main motivation for creating the graphic book, which is reaching more readers than any of my other books.

It is also a main motivation for my breaking the rules, going against convention, pushing disciplinary boundaries, and rebelling against scholarly narrative style to co-create the genre “intimate ethnography” in which I conducted research and wrote the story of my father’s life history that is also a critical social history (Waterston 2024). That I centered my own father as subject of an anthropological work was an unusual move that might have brought harm to my professional reputation given the very personal nature of the project. By the time I embarked on it, I chose not to worry about Nordstrom’s real or imagined critics. I wanted to write an ethnography of violence, a book that would draw readers into a compelling account of one man’s movements across a brutal history, illuminating along the way the specific ideological and systemic forces implicated in his story that have resonance for contemporary social conditions and dynamics. Given the condition of ubiquitous violence in the contemporary world, I felt that sense of urgency to do the research, develop the genre, and write the book.

Yet it is not enough to be knowledge experts. In my view, we need to take that knowledge and put it to work. After all, we are all living in a precarious world, and that includes the disproportionate number of scholars themselves living in precarity because of the state of academic employment today. Changing the world is not merely an academic exercise; it is an imperative, especially considering the kinds of “exigent conditions” referenced throughout this essay.

It is not surprising that people often seem at a loss about what is to be done to effect substantive change, leaving them in despair. Having experienced this sense of despair myself, I find strength in the words and works of social justice advocates like the activist Mariame Kaba who declares, “hope is not a fuzzy feeling [...] it is a discipline ... it matters to believe

that it's possible to change the world [...]. We don't live in a predetermined, predestined world where nothing we do has an impact. Change is, in fact, constant" (Kaba 2020).

To sustain hope requires imagining an alternative world, and to be specific about "what kind of world we want, what kinds of productive relations we want, and what it actually takes to achieve them in the face of extremely powerful opposition" (Marcetic and Smith 2019).

I believe many anthropologists do know what kind of world they want and are doing their bit to achieve it, taking on tasks. Yet, they rarely acknowledge the significance of their contributions because, too often, they do not see how their work – whether in the field itself or activities outside it – *combine* as a larger effort to effect positive social change. I believe we need to acknowledge that this *is* what we *are* doing, and that we are a powerful creative force. The works of anthropologists who are participant-observers of the ways people all over the world improvise for life, those who push against convention, liberating themselves to innovate and improvise, and those who put hope to work in the pursuit of social justice towards "happiness" by means of local and global activist collaboration – taken together, this work and these anthropologists reflect participation in collective struggle.

They – we – are doing the work, day-in-and-day-out, most often without recognition in the mainstream media or popular culture, and sometimes – all too often – suppressed by extremely powerful opposing forces. I say: let us claim the struggles of which we are a part and let us claim the positive contributions that we make – by improvisation or by any other means.

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# The trope of ‘the ecological Indian’ in retrospect: Reflections on the concept of indigeneity

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay discusses the concept of ‘indigeneity’ and the pervasive attribution to Indigenous people of ecological wisdom. Beyond the complex modern politics surrounding Indigenous identities, the concept refers to cultural worldviews that are antithetical to modernity, particularly as they relate to social and human-environmental relations, sustainability, and money. A common denominator of the many observations on the ecological sensibilities of Indigenous people appears to be their embeddedness: their rejection of abstraction and the decontextualising forces of money. Another way of expressing this is their commitment to a specific place. The debate on ‘the ecological Indian’ that engaged many historians and anthropologists over three decades – most intensely from the late 1970s to the late 2000s – reflects a genuine concern about alternative ways of organising social and human-environmental relations. Many environmentalists praise Indigenous peoples as guardians of ‘traditional ecological knowledge,’ which might help us become more sustainable. A more profound aspect of what is being referred to as Indigenous ecological wisdom, however, is the inclination to maintain a close attachment to place. Such attachment is conducive to the kind of relational ontologies that Edward Tylor disparaged as animism. This paradoxical impasse of modernity – the widespread admiration of its cosmological antithesis – poses a formidable challenge to post-Enlightenment civilisation. This essay explores the image of Indigenous ecological wisdom, rooted in the historical encounter between European and Native American societies and today reflecting widespread doubts about the sustainability of capitalist civilisation. It attempts to determine the core of the inadequacy that haunts modern people who are prone to ennoble the generic Native. In identifying the modern sense of alienation and placelessness that underlies such projections, it rejects naïve essentialism as well as ironic versions of constructionism, both of which generate political and existential problems for Indigenous people. It concludes that the extolling of the ecological Native is a projection of widespread discontent with the alienation of modern capitalist civilisation, ultimately deriving from monetisation and the so-called Axial transition toward an abstraction of worldviews and social relations.

**Keywords:** indigeneity; ecological wisdom; human-environmental relations; embeddedness; place; animism; Native Americans

## Preamble

In 1983, three environmental activists from Nova Scotia, Canada, travelled to Sweden to protest the Swedish corporation Stora Kopparberg’s plans to aerially spray herbicides over its clearcuts on Cape Breton Island. The company ran a pulp mill on the island and wanted to secure its future supplies of conifer pulpwood from being overrun by deciduous saplings.

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The herbicide to be used was banned in Sweden and related to the infamous Agent Orange applied by Americans to defoliate trees in Vietnam. One of the environmentalists was Ryan Googoo, band chief at the Mi'kmaq First Nation community of Whycomagh, who complained that aerial spraying in the vicinity of Mi'kmaq communities would be harmful to their health. The issue was widely publicised in Swedish media and immediately gained strong public support in the country, even from prime minister Olof Palme. It appealed in a very straightforward way to Swedish sensibilities about Indigenous people,<sup>1</sup> environmental destruction, capitalist corporations, and the Vietnam War.

In 1988, as Stora Kopparberg was celebrating its 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the city of Falun, another delegation of environmentalists arrived from Nova Scotia to repeat the protests. This time, too, one of the activists, Charles Bernard, Jr., was a Mi'kmaq from Whycomagh. Again, the involvement of Indigenous people received much attention in Swedish media. Some newspapers referred to the three environmentalists collectively as 'Indians' (*Dala-Demokraten*, 21 June 1988), although only one of them was Indigenous. Like Googoo five years earlier, Bernard arrived dressed in conventional modern clothing, but was advised by Swedish partners to don seemingly 'Indian' (but conspicuously non-Mi'kmaq) insignia, including a feather headband and a drum. Seizing on the dramaturgical character of the encounter, the president of Stora Kopparberg, Bo Berggren, embraced Bernard dressed in traditional Swedish folk costume. The startling photograph was published in the leading paper *Expressen* (19 June 1988), which declared "The Indian War Over – Winner: Bo Berggren."

It seemed clear that the role of Indigenous people in these protests could be examined from a variety of perspectives, ranging from the incentives and experiences of individual activists, to the symbolic power of Indigenous voices within environmentalist discourse. Between May 1991 and April 1993, I spent a total of ten months in Nova Scotia investigating these issues. Some of my conclusions were published in articles in various contexts (Hornborg 1993, 1994, 1995, 1997, 1998). As I revisit my field notes more than 30 years later, I discover that the passing of three decades has largely shifted the focus of my concerns. While much of my attention in the 1990s focused on the existential and political incentives propelling specific cases of Indigenous activism, I would now place more emphasis on the widespread trope of 'the ecological Indian' as the condition for such activism. What does this pervasive concession to Indigenous critique ultimately signify? This is a separate issue – and requires separate analysis – from the opportunities for self-assertion that it offers Indigenous movements.

For ten months I traced the complex networks of relations between several environmental organisations and different factions of Mi'kmaq activists and politicians across Nova Scotia. It became evident that mainstream Canadian society had prepared a discursive 'niche' for Indigenous environmentalists and that many Mi'kmaq were keen to occupy it, now that they were finally being listened to. Journalists played a key role in helping to frame Mi'kmaq concerns in structurally predictable ways, sometimes literally putting words in the mouths of their interviewees (Hornborg 1994: 249). In addition to protesting herbicides, clearcuts, and other aspects of industrial forestry, Mi'kmaq had become involved in a range

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Vecsey has quoted Åke Hultkrantz as saying: "We Swedes are crazy for Indians; we always have been" (Parkhill 1997: 126). This was embarrassingly illustrated by a group of European hippies claiming to be Mi'kmaq, who in 1992 stayed for several months in the forests of northern Sweden, enjoying the good will of credulous Swedes (Hornborg 1998: 208).



of environmental issues on Cape Breton and the adjacent mainland. Most dramatically, their different factions – from band council bureaucrats to militant traditionalists – had united in opposing a proposed granite quarry on a mountain regarded as sacred. The prominence of Indigenous voices in these environmental conflicts – and the efficacy of their objections, recognised by non-Native environmental organisations that were eager to invite their collaboration – clearly had structural requisites. In this retrospective essay, I shall reflect on the pervasive category of ‘the ecological Indian’ – its emergence, contestations, and transformations over time. Rather than dwell on ethnographical specifics, I shall focus on the modern connotations of indigeneity that were a precondition to Mi’kmaq engagement in environmental issues. My final aim is to understand the extolling of the ecological Native as a projection of widespread discontent with the alienation of modern capitalist civilisation. The pivotal role of Mi’kmaq environmentalists in Swedish media in the 1980s, thus serves as an entry-point into a broader reflection on the widespread ambivalence about modernity. The pervasive trope of ‘the ecological Indian,’ as illustrated by the perspectives and deliberations discussed here, helps to illuminate this ambivalence.

### **The emergence of the trope**

The debate on ‘the ecological Indian’ that engaged many historians and anthropologists over three decades – most intensely from the late 1970s to the late 2000s – reflects a genuine concern about alternative ways of organising human-environmental relations. It can be traced to the divide between Native and settler colonialist societies in the Americas, reflecting fundamental differences in how the two populations conceived of social as well as human-environmental relations. The confrontation between European and Native American societies was unilaterally genocidal, reducing Indigenous populations in most areas by at least 90%, but its cultural ramifications worked both ways. The historical ambivalence of the settler colonists vis-à-vis the natives – a characteristic blend of fear, condescension, guilt, and admiration – has remained an enduring component not only of American culture, but also of the European worldview. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century, Native American critiques of European society strongly influenced French intellectuals whose ideas were foundational to the Enlightenment (Graeber and Wengrow 2021). Critiques of European civilisation by Rousseau and others frequently referred to Indigenous Americans as a foil for the avarice and injustices of Europe. Such rhetorical polarisation of Amerindian and European cultures – rooted in real differences but transmuted through the centuries – has been particularly prominent in the past few decades of deliberations on human-environmental relations.

Confrontations between capitalist civilisation and Indigenous peoples have occurred on all continents, but the extent to which Native North Americans have come to serve as the paradigmatic antithesis of modern Europeans has granted this specific opposition a symbolic centrality that is emulated in Indigenous struggles worldwide, from Polynesia to Scandinavia (Tsing [2007] 2020). The discussion in this essay is mainly focused on how indigeneity has been represented among historians, anthropologists, and activists in North

America during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.<sup>2</sup>

In its most general form, the conventional stereotype suggests that Native Americans are 'ecologically wiser' than non-Natives. This is the simplest and most essentialist approach to the issue, seemingly based on historical evidence, and widely popularised in Euro-American societies for centuries. It is essentialist in the sense that it attributes ecological wisdom to an ethnic category of people, without regard to cultural, historical, or individual variations. Although a persistent trope, it is increasingly rare to find it professed in this simple, categorical form, except as part of political rhetoric. Such rhetoric has found support in several overly categorical narratives written in the 1980s and 1990s by environmentalists, historians of religion, anthropologists, and environmental historians (e.g., Hughes 1983; Suzuki and Knudtson 1992; Merchant 1992: 110-131; Anderson 1996; Harrod 2000).

Introducing their collection of "sacred Native stories of nature" from all over the world, environmentalists David Suzuki and Peter Knudtson (1992: 18) assert that "there is a fundamental division between Native and Western ecological perspectives." Within Native worldviews, they continue, "the parts and processes of the universe are, to varying degrees, holy; to science, they can only be secular." This distinct dichotomy between Native and non-Native understandings of the environment is a recurrent theme among environmental historians describing the ecological transformations of North America after European colonisation (Cronon 1983; Hughes 1983; Merchant 1989). It is also frequently reiterated by historians of Native American religions (Vecsey 1980; Hultkrantz 1979; Harrod 2000). Many historians have suggested that modern society, given its professed goal to become more sustainable, has much to learn from the ecological wisdom of Indigenous people. For instance, Donald Hughes ([1983] 1996: 139) asserts that "we can gain much by studying our American Indian heritage and seeking modern applications of the wisdom we find there." Carolyn Merchant (1992: 121) similarly writes that "[a] generation of ecologically conscious people have found inspiration in native American beliefs that nature is alive and the earth is a mother." By the early 1990s, such references to Indigenous ecological wisdom were axiomatic in deliberations on environmental issues.

### **Indigenous identity, constructionism, and the modern longing for Place**

By the 1990s, there had simultaneously emerged a general wariness about attributing essentialised features such as 'wisdom' to an ethnic category like Native Americans. In part, this reflected a growing awareness of the extent to which ethnic identities and attributes are to be understood not as objective essences, but as continuously negotiated means of boundary maintenance vis-à-vis other ethnic categories (Barth [1969] 1998; Sokolovskii and Tishkov 1996). Doubts about the authenticity of purportedly Indigenous identities and sentiments were boosted by the academic turn toward social constructionism. A startling illustration of the insensitivity sometimes produced in ethnographers' first encounters with Indigenous 'invention of tradition' is Eugene E. Roosens' (1989: 47) account of cultural creativity among the Huron (Wendat) of Quebec:

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<sup>2</sup> This limitation stems from the author's fieldwork among Mi'kmaq environmental activists in the 1990s. It should not be interpreted as ignorance or diminishment of Indigenous movements in other parts of the world. In Latin America, particularly in the Andean countries, indigeneity is a considerably more salient political issue than in North America, inspiring strong Indigenous movements in their struggle for a *decolonial* future beyond extractive capitalism.

[M]ost of the modern traits, virtually everything, were ‘counterfeit’: the folklore articles, the hair style, the mocassins, the ‘Indian’ parade costumes, the canoes, the pottery, the language, the music.

At a more popular level, such scepticism may have harked back to how non-Native people and ideas had long infiltrated iconic ‘Amerindian’ figures and messages such as the fraudulent Grey Owl in the 1930s and the adulterated speech of Chief Seattle, which was widely cited and apotheosised by environmentalists in the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Native and non-Native people alike had become increasingly aware of how the identities and imagined features of ‘the American Indian’ were being *produced* in the interaction between Native Americans and mainstream society (Roosens 1989; Francis 1992; Hornborg 1994; Bordewich 1996; Biolsi and Zimmerman 1997; Parkhill 1997; Krech 1999; Harkin and Lewis 2007; Hornborg 2008). Observations on the ‘White Man’s Indian’ refer not only to stereotyped images of Natives that are prevalent among non-Natives, but also to the influence of such projections on the actual formation of ethnic identity and personhood among Native people (cf. Parkhill 1997: 139-144). The dilemma of the ‘positive stereotype’ has generated much frustration among Native Americans, particularly as they have been idealised by the environmental movement.<sup>4</sup> The Lakota scholar Vine Deloria, Jr., whose compelling critiques of non-Native engagement with Native American societies have been pivotal ever since the publication of his first book *Custer Died for Your Sins* in 1969, saw nothing hopeful in the trope of ‘the ecological Indian’:

American Indian delegations have been active in world environmental movements but have brought only a romantic sentimentalism as their contribution. It is totally disheartening to see Indians interviewed in the seemingly endless documentaries about the environment and find them telling us that the earth is our mother. The interviewer nods wisely, the Indian looks solemn, and the destruction continues. (Deloria 1997: 213)

The turn toward ‘deconstruction’ of conventional, positive stereotypes of Native Americans has led to a widespread scepticism about such stereotypes. Thomas Parkhill (1997) traces how the journalist and folklorist Charles Godfrey Leland (1824-1903) had allowed his own stereotyped images and personal conditions to colour his documentation of Algonquian (Abenaki and Mi’kmaq) legends, published in 1884. Parkhill’s study intertwines several disparate strands of thought relating to his struggles to grasp the cultural dynamics of representing ‘the Indian.’ He begins by referring to a heated 1993 email conversation involving, among others, Ronald Grimes, Sam Gill, Vine Deloria, Jr., and himself, on

<sup>3</sup> After his death in 1938, the internationally celebrated ‘Apache’ Grey Owl was revealed to be a pure Englishman by the name of Archie Belaney. The speech attributed to Suquamish/Duwamish chief Seattle (Si’ahl) in 1854 has been radically distorted through multiple non-Native translations and embellishments, finally granting it cult status among environmentalists throughout the world in the 1970s. Scepticism has even been voiced about the Lakota sage Black Elk, who had been a Roman Catholic for over forty years and spent three years in Europe, see Parkhill (1997: 118).

<sup>4</sup> For a nuanced discussion of the complex relations between radical environmentalists and Native Americans in the 1990s, see Taylor (1997).

the problems of representation raised by European Americans teaching courses on Native American religions. He then recalls the prominent role of fictive 'Indian' dramaturgy at a Boy Scout camp in Vermont that he attended as a teenager, before mentioning some of the many Euro-American movements and individuals who have dedicated themselves to imitating 'Indian' culture. In Parkhill's words, these are examples of non-Natives trying to "incarnate their own images of the 'Indian' stereotype" (Parkhill 1997: 15).

Parkhill shows that Leland's goal was to instil among the settler colonialists a "sense of belonging to the land" (ibid.: 91), a *sense of place*. In this work, he was inspired by German Romantics like Friedrich Schelling, who emphasised the long-term existential connections between humans and the land they experience as their place. Although most Native American activists would no doubt identify with this fundamentally anti-modernist stance, the infamous efforts by German Nazis to convert it into modern politics has made any mention of the attachment of a people (*Volk*) to place politically suspect.<sup>5</sup> However, having identified the "need for place" as characteristic of contemporary "hegemonic culture," Parkhill (1997: 110) suggests that the United Nations' declaration of 1993 as the International Year of Indigenous People reflects the fact that the need for place had become "a global rather than national or continental matter."<sup>6</sup>

### The politics of the ecologically noble Native

Given the widespread idealisation of the ecological Native, Parkhill observes, relations between Natives and non-Natives "will be fraught with unmet and unmeetable expectations at best, and charges of deceit and fraud at worst" (Parkhill 1997: 129). The intimation of fraud is implicit in much of the debate about 'the ecological Indian.' Rather than consider this stereotype a problem inherent in modernity, evoking the placelessness and unsustainability of mainstream society, the anthropologist Shepard Krech III (1999) set out to examine its empirical validity. Instead of approaching the stereotype as a misguided reflection of its authors, he chose to highlight how its targets have failed to live up to its ideals. Krech thus gives the impression of disparaging the generic Native American for falling short of the non-Native fantasy. Adducing a range of circumstances from Pleistocene extinctions, buffalo jumps, and Hohokam salinisation to the 16<sup>th</sup>- to 19<sup>th</sup>-century trade in deerskins and beaver pelts, he is intent to rid the environmentalists of their illusions. Parts of his book, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (1999), clearly have an ironic and polemical tone:

[T]hroughout the five-hundred-year history of imagery of Indigenous nobility is a rich tradition whereby the Noble Indian – including today's Ecological Indian – is a foil for critiques of European or American society. As Vine Deloria, Jr., the Lakota activist, remarked, white people "*destroyed planet earth*." Writing as heatedly, many since 1970 have excoriated American society for all the environmental damage in Indian Country, and pointedly charged white people of environmental racism and "radioactive colonialism." (Krech 1999: 214; emphasis in original)

<sup>5</sup> Parkhill (1997: 192, n28) finds in Deloria (1997), "[o]ne unexpected voice that resonates with German Romanticism."

<sup>6</sup> Marisol de la Cadena and Orin Starn ([2007] 2020: 10) derive this declaration from the increasing visibility of Indigenous activism and the "new ascendancy [of multiculturalism] in global political discourse."

Krech's approach commits the error of mixing constructionist and essentialist perspectives: although recognising that the stereotype of 'the ecological Indian' is a "projection of Europeans and European-Americans" that has become a "self-image" embedded in the "self-fashioning" of modern Native Americans (Krech 1999: 27), his aim is to expose the poor fit between this image and the actual environmental record of an essentialised population of humans extending throughout the continent from the Pleistocene until today. This approach has understandably provoked much indignation.

Prompted by Krech's book, a conference at the University of Wyoming in 2002 critically discussed its thesis and problematic political implications. Michael Harkin and David Lewis (2007: xxiv) write that "he and his book have been called racist and politically incorrect, easily co-opted by those seeking to dismantle Native American lands, rights, and sovereignty." They note that Vine Deloria, Jr. had issued a call via internet discussion groups to "attend the conference in protest" (Deloria 1997: xxii). In a comment on the animated debate provoked by the book, Krech (2007a: 6, 25, n5) mentions that Deloria had called him "the worst kind of racist." He recognises that his book "was caught up in identity politics and charges of political incorrectness" (Krech 2007b: 348). The politically sensitive character of the topic is underscored by the fact that interpretations of what is said may be contingent on who says it. For example, Murray Wax (1997: 59, n3) had previously cited Deloria himself as saying:

Our activists chastise the white man for his destruction of nature, and admonish people to respect the Sacred Mother Earth, while they themselves are throwing empty beer cans along the road. Many of our communities look like junkyards... While we are poor there is no excuse for being either destructive or dirty about the way we live.

As Krech's book *The Ecological Indian* and the ensuing debate underscored, assessments of Indigenous ecological wisdom or nobility had created a hall of mirrors, filled with contestation, credulousness, cynicism, and insults. The image of the ecological Indian has given Indigenous people considerable political influence, helping them mobilise wide support for local struggles, for instance over land rights.<sup>7</sup> While there are many instances around the world in which environmentalists and Indigenous people have created successful alliances, in other cases – such as the hunting of iconic wildlife like wolves, seals, or whales – they have been opposed. In such disputes, environmentalists have often expressed disappointment and anger, accusing Indigenous people of betraying their authentic cultural values. Paul Nadasdy (2005) has shown that such controversies largely derive from the recurrent mistake among non-Native environmentalists of judging Native American positions on resource management in terms of a spectrum of Euro-American cultural categories, that to many Native Americans are meaningless. Michael Dove (2006) has reviewed the various problems that recur at the interface of Indigenous movements and environmental politics, including charges of opportunism, inauthenticity, exclusivity, and racism.

In a highly opinionated intervention, Adam Kuper (2003: 392, 395) has acerbically rejected the very concept of indigeneity, proposing that Native Americans are as immigrant

<sup>7</sup> For an early observation in this regard, see Conklin and Graham 1995.

as Euro-Americans, that land claims based on descent imply a “drift to racism,” and that spokespeople for Indigenous identities paradoxically demand recognition “in the idiom of Western culture theory.” Kuper (2003: 395, 401) argues that the image of the ‘primitive’ is constructed “to suit the Greens and the anti-globalisation movement” and finishes his response to critical comments with a sarcastic crescendo that positions him as a frontline chauvinist of capitalist civilisation:

Like the old enemies of civilization, those who inveigh against globalization seem to expect the Noble Savage to stand in its way, like Obelix the Gaul hurling menhirs at the Romans.

Toward the end of the 2000s, the discourse on ‘the ecological Indian’ appears to have reached an impasse, in which the various arguments and incentives had become plain to see for most participants. This is not to say that the rhetorical use of the image would not continue to pervade popular and academic deliberations on environmental issues to this day,<sup>8</sup> but that its proponents and critics alike had become familiar with the political strategies and contexts in which it tends to be promoted and contested. It had become increasingly clear that the romantic stereotype of Indigenous ecological wisdom is largely a Euro-American projection, but also that it continues to provide Native Americans and other Indigenous people with a politically compelling platform, which at times leads them to confrontations with non-Native groups, including environmentalists. The diverse ways in which the category ‘Indigenous people’ is being employed in different contexts, reflecting the political strategies of variously positioned social groups, does not consistently harmonise with environmentalist concerns (de la Cadena and Starn [2007] 2020). Given that the concept of indigeneity is a product of colonial history and of modernity, the political tensions that it generates must be understood as internal to the self-critical modern civilisation from which it sprang. Beyond ethnographically tracing the diverse ways in which it is deployed, anthropology can illuminate the contradictory genesis of the concept itself.

Two readers in environmental anthropology from the late 2000s offer overviews of then-current debates on the relation between environmental issues and Indigenous cultures, knowledge systems, and movements (Haenn and Wilk 2006; Dove and Carpenter 2008). While the positions range widely – from David Maybury-Lewis’ (2006) essentialist nostalgia for the “tribal wisdom” of the Xavante; through Peter Brosius’ (2006) deconstruction of how environmentalists’ distortions of ecological knowledge among the Penan are adopted by the Penan themselves; to Will Anderson’s (2006) comment on the controversial resumption of whaling among the Makah – the fundamental tropes, relations, and political tensions reiterate a familiar pattern. Whether genuine or spurious, the invocation of the ecological Native continues to organise the modern worldview. Although put to different uses, the image of modernity’s Other haunts us as a fantasy, a conscience, a desire for authentic wisdom. Beyond the myriad tangible ways in which it shapes the lives of people across the globe, it tells us something about our ambivalence regarding modern civilisation. Even if,

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<sup>8</sup> As recently as in his final, posthumously published book, Bruno Latour (2024: 30-31) writes: “Whereas, just a few decades ago, Indigenous peoples were considered to belong to the past of peoples who were unanimously marching toward progress, now those same Indigenous peoples are *ahead of us* in the search for a way of caring for the world that we now share with them” (emphasis in original).

over the course of three decades around the turn of the millennium – from the late 1970s to the late 2000s – we learnt to be sceptical of essentialising attributions of ecological wisdom to specific ethnic groups, we are no less convinced that there must be an alternative to our own social and ecological deficiencies. Although less likely to be projected onto real people, the image of the ‘noble savage’ remains an integral part of civilisation itself. It is incumbent on anthropology to comprehend what this persistent trope ultimately signifies.

### **Wisdom sits in places**

Although they hardly mention the ecological predicament of humankind,<sup>9</sup> Graeber and Wengrow’s (2021) world history *The Dawn of Everything* treats the image of the ‘noble savage’ as a powerful reminder that human life could be more agreeable than it is for most people. In the spirit of their conviction that hierarchy and inequality are not inevitable features of human societies but unfortunate conditions that can be rejected, we must identify the source of our discontents, persistently pursuing their most fundamental question about the shortcomings of modern civilisation: “How did we get stuck?”

Beyond the struggle between essentialism and constructionism, anthropologists and philosophers trying to capture what the tenacious image of Indigenous ecological wisdom might refer to have focused on either of two aspects, which seem divergent but are closely related. On the practical side, many have emphasised the fact that Indigenous people tend to possess very detailed knowledge of their local ecosystems. This ‘traditional ecological knowledge,’ as it is commonly called, is often invoked in arguments for local self-governance. It is also understood as a potential asset for externally trained experts in sustainable resource management. On the experiential side, there have been numerous observations on the phenomenological dimension of Indigenous people’s relations to the landscapes and places to which they may feel intimately – even inextricably – connected. These two aspects generally engage two quite different kinds of scholars (resource managers versus philosophers), although both aspects tend to derive from the same circumstances: people’s long-term attachment to place. This illustrates how our understanding of what is clearly a single phenomenon is fragmented by the way knowledge production is organised in Euro-American society. Representations of the objective biophysical environment are conceived as fundamentally separate from subjective experiences of the same place, although both may have been formed through long and intimate involvement with that place. Even if studies of Indigenous knowledge often evoke the sociocultural dimensions of local experience, they tend to gravitate toward a managerialist approach (Berkes 1999; Menzies 2006; Jessen et al. 2022; Gómez-Baggethun 2022). While regularly merged in environmental rhetoric, ethnobiology and phenomenology belong to very different research traditions requiring radically divergent points of departure (Nazarea 1999; Sillitoe 2007). The notion that outsiders trained in resource management may incorporate local knowledge to enhance sustainability is to underestimate the essential differences between two systems of knowledge: specific versus abstract, experiential versus cerebral, local versus global, contextual versus decontextualised. As Paul Sillitoe (2007: 12) concedes, “there are dimensions to understanding and living in the world other than the intellectual, for human experience and knowledge encompass far more than words can convey.” Local knowledge

<sup>9</sup> I discuss this puzzling omission in a previous publication (Hornborg 2023: 208).

is a *relation* between knower and known, not a resource accessible for extraction from its context. Although the ambition of resource managers, development agencies, and educators to incorporate the local in the global is no doubt well-meaning, the structural obstacles are formidable. It recalls the asymmetric relation between what Jürgen Habermas called “system” and “lifeworld” – and the aspiration of modernist schemes of social engineering to encompass and control their subjects, which, as James Scott (1998) showed in *Seeing Like a State*, must always fail. The celebration by modern resource managers of ‘traditional ecological knowledge,’ ‘Indigenous knowledge,’ or ‘local knowledge’ is finally as paradoxical and contradictory as the image of the ecological Native from which it derives. There is something profoundly incongruous about a civilisation eulogising the peoples, cultures, and knowledge systems that it is in the process of destroying.

If a fundamental condition of Indigenous people’s claims to ecological wisdom is their long-term attachment to place, then their message is clearly antithetical to a civilisation founded on decontextualisation and placelessness. Yet, as colonial and capitalist expansionism has been transmuted into the subtle logic of the global market, public discourse has admitted official concessions to Indigenous peoples that were unthinkable a few generations ago. This has confirmed and augmented internal doubts about the sustainability of capitalist civilisation while providing opportunities for marginalised groups to assert their ethnic identities and land claims in new ways. This reorganisation of the discursive landscape has put many anthropologists in an ambivalent position. Having internalised the tenets of constructionism, it has been difficult for them to accept the new ethnic claims at face value. The dilemma is summed up by Michael Dove and co-authors:

What do we make of the extraordinary coincidence that anthropology (and the other social sciences) began to critique the concept of Indigeneity at the very time that it was being legitimised by mainstream global organisations like the United Nations and the International Labor Organization? How is academia’s assault on locality related to the larger assault on locality of modernity? (Dove et al. 2007: 148)

To the first question, the answer would be that global legitimisation has encouraged instrumental assertions of indigeneity that anthropologists are uniquely positioned to examine. The second question is more troubling. Having recently believed themselves to have jettisoned their ties to colonialism, anthropologists must now consider if their sceptical stance makes them into accomplices of neoliberal modernity.

As we have noted, long-term familiarity and identification with a particular geographical space is conducive to two different aspects of what environmentalists have referred to as ecological wisdom: on the one hand, detailed knowledge of local ecosystems and, on the other, an existential and emotional connection to unique places. The former is often “extremely sophisticated and of considerable practical value” (Suzuki and Knudtson 1992: 15). It is this “practical value” that has inspired externally trained experts, including commercial interests, to approach ‘traditional ecological knowledge’ as a resource to be tapped. The comprehensiveness of Indigenous ecological knowledge is typically conveyed by means of quantification: the Hanunoo can distinguish 1,600 plant species; the Kayapó “rely upon more than 250 different species of plants for their fruits alone, and hundreds



more for their roots, nuts, and other edible parts”; traditional healers in Southeast Asia may use up to 6,500 kinds of medicinal herbs; and so on (ibid.). The modern documentation of such “repositories of vast accumulations of traditional knowledge and experience” (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987: 114) is a distinctly different enterprise than anthropological attempts to fathom the experiential dimension of a profound engagement of humans with their local environment. The latter dimension is inherently difficult to study and communicate because it consists of perceptions and sensations that occur beyond the reach of everyday language.

Often drawing on the tradition of phenomenology as developed by philosophers like Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, some anthropologists have felt the urge to convey the tacit connection to place that they have sensed among the generally rural people who have hosted their fieldwork. Although largely unspoken, such connections have made a strong impression on many anthropologists accustomed to more placeless lives. In the mid-90s, some of them addressed the phenomenology of ‘place’ as a focus of observation and analysis. Pioneering contributions to this discourse include a collection edited by Eric Hirsch and Michael O’Hanlon (1995). In his introduction, Hirsch (1995: 9) notes that, in geography and anthropology, there is “a tension evident in the relationship between the subject-position of place and the non-subject-position of space in the way landscape has been taken up as an analytical concept.” Efforts by anthropologists to convey the attachment to place that they have noticed among their hosts have acknowledged the constraints of regular language – and the contradictory aspirations of anthropology – by consciously resorting to metaphor and poetry (Jackson 1995; Basso 1996). Significantly, their most thought-provoking ethnographies rely on a radical commitment to empiricism. Employing the concept of ‘home’ rather than place, Michael Jackson (1995: 123; emphases in original) explains how fieldwork among the Walpiri in Australia led him to “eschew thinking of home as an entity or essence that could be *defined*, and to focus instead on *describing* the lived relationship suggested by the phrase ‘being-at-home-in-the-world.’” In exploring the multi-layered relations to place among the Western Apache, Keith Basso (1996: 145, 148) similarly emphasises that, whereas “sense of place is a universal genre of experience,” it everywhere “hinges on the particulars.” Jackson’s and Basso’s ethnographies are profound reminders that such attachment to place is not easily accessible to abstract theorisation. While pervasively evoked in images of the ecological Native, it remains tantalisingly out of reach for most modern people, for whom it would be inconceivable that “selfhood and placehood are completely intertwined” (ibid., 146). Yet, the constitution of the thoroughly local person often does seem inextricable from context or place, which Richard Shweder and Edmund Bourne (1984: 166) refer to as a distinctive mode of social thought among some non-Western peoples that “goes under a variety of cognate descriptions – concrete, non-abstractive, non-generalizing, occasion-bound, context-specific, undifferentiated, situational.” To be profoundly *emplaced* means identifying oneself with points of reference that are concrete and specific rather than abstract and interchangeable.

To invoke the extra-linguistic sensibilities that are implicit in any human bonding with a particular environment, some anthropologists have focused on the concept of ‘emotion’ (Anderson 1996; Milton 2002). Like other phenomena at the individual level, emotions are expressions of the relations in which they are immersed. In an article based on her fieldwork among Nayaka hunter-gatherers in India, Nurit Bird-David (1999) proposed a

rethinking of the foundational anthropological concept of 'animism' in terms of what she calls a "relational epistemology." She argues that what Edward Tylor in 1871 had defined as a 'primitive' and erroneous understanding of the world, attributing animacy and spirit to inanimate things in the environment, is really a matter of *relating* to it, rather than clinically separating knower and known through a modern, objectivist stance committed to detached representation. "Relational" ways of knowing stand for "attentiveness to variances and invariances in behaviour and response of things in states of relatedness and for getting to know such things as they change through the vicissitudes over time of the engagement with them" (Bird-David 1999: 77). For animists, to know is to relate. It is to extend to all aspects of the environment the expectation that propitiation will be reciprocated with benevolence: in other words, the cognitive skills essential to sociability. In this light, the modern objectivism epitomised by Descartes is quite simply correlated with alienation.

### **Conclusions: Relatedness, axiality, and money**

The image of the ecologically attuned Native evokes a cluster of features that seem diametrically opposed to the premises of modern civilisation: contextual versus general, concrete versus abstract, local versus global, experiential versus intellectual, relational versus objectivist, and so on. On closer examination, these oppositions can be understood as closely related to each other and as jointly traceable to the development of Eurasian civilisation after the onset of the so-called Axial Age around 600 BCE (Jaspers [1949] 2021). As Richard Seaford (2004) has observed, this was the point in history at which the first coined money appeared.

The literature on the Axial Age is voluminous, having engaged scholars in philosophy, sociology, psychology, history, anthropology, and several other fields (Bellah and Joas 2012). Marshall Sahlins (2022: 4) refers to "the large cottage industry of scholarly commentary" that followed Karl Jaspers' observations on the simultaneous transitions to "transcendentalism" in several parts of Eurasia in the Axial Age. Cultures unaffected by the Axial shift to transcendence are characterised by what Sahlins calls "immanentism": the world – including those parts of it that modern people would consider inanimate – is understood as fundamentally sentient and responsive. In Axial cultures, on the other hand, the turn to transcendent spirits left humans with "an earth that had become a subjectless 'nature'" (Sahlins 2022: 4). Sahlins rejects anthropology's traditional approach to the immanentist cultures encountered by Europeans, condescendingly treating their understandings of the world as erroneous 'beliefs' about a reality to which our own has privileged access (Sahlins 2022: 13). A paradigmatic example is Charles de Brosses' discussion in 1760 of African fetishism (Morris and Leonard 2017). De Brosses' excessive condescension regarding convictions about immanent agency is the very opposite of Sahlins' commitment to taking seriously the natives' point of view. Inspired by Giambattista Vico, Sahlins (2022: 21) advocates an anthropology that respects "its informants' words as a distinctive ontology constituting worlds other than ours." Like Bird-David, he understands a pre- or non-Cartesian ontology as a pervasively attentive stance rather than a failed epistemology (ibid.: 10).

As Philippe Descola (2013), Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998), Kaj Århem (1996, 1998), and other ethnographers of animist societies have confirmed, what is characteristic of these societies is "the attribution by humans to nonhumans of an interiority identical to their own" (Descola 2013: 129). Their worlds are populated by nonhuman persons to be approached as subjects, rather than objects. Reviewing a vast range of ethnographic

information on immanentist societies around the world, Sahlins demonstrates the ubiquity of such intersubjective relationism. This was the ‘primitive’ condition rejected by the Enlightenment and disparaged by de Brosses, but paradoxically also what some modern environmentalists glorify as ‘sacred ecological wisdom.’ Many modern people thus seem to be torn between what a modern approach *says* about the world and what it *does* to it. Knowledge based on dispassionate detachment may be useful, but tends to be devoid of responsibility.

Bird-David’s point is that animism, understood as a relational approach to the nonhuman environment, is an extension of sociability beyond society. The same point has been made by Descola (1994), who found that Achuar relations to garden plants and wild game had much in common with their relations to children and affines, respectively.<sup>10</sup> To be profoundly embedded in local social and ecological contexts thus appears to be conducive to the kind of relational or immanentist outlooks that Tylor called animism. As Århem (1998: 98-99) suggests, a “participatory ontological stance” derives from “deep practical and experiential involvement in the local environment,” a “radical intimacy between humans and their environment, characteristic of an intensely localised mode of life.” This agrees with the observation that the turn to transcendentalism and abstraction that defined the Axial Age was correlated with *disembedding*, that is, decontextualisation. As David McNally (2020: 39) notes, “one of the oldest Latin meanings of the verb *abstract* is ‘to separate or pull away.’” Abstraction, in turn, is closely associated with money. With the capitalist market economy, McNally writes, comes

the colonization of life by the abstract, quantitative metrics of commodities and prices. ... What guarantees connection to the land is not communal memory, but the (alienated) social synthesis of money. At the most fundamental of levels, monetization is thus a victory of the abstract over the concrete. (McNally 2020: 110-111)

If the Axial transition is correlated with changing social conditions, monetisation indeed appears to be central to the process. The symbolic polarisation of capitalist civilisation and its Indigenous antithesis is not to be understood as an opposition between different kinds of people equipped with different measures of wisdom or nobility. It is an opposition between two divergent human mentalities, reflecting the extent to which social relations have submitted to monetisation. Graeber and Wengrow (2021: 54) cite the French baron de la Hontan’s rendering of the Native American (Wendat) thinker Kandiaronk’s disparaging remarks in the 1690s on money as “the devil of devils.” The important thing is not whose exact words they were – the French baron’s or the Native’s – but the fact that Native American societies provided the French Enlightenment with ideological levers with which to critique the injustices of European society. The critique of the logic of money continues to this day, now more justified than ever.

As many have observed, money tends to truncate the social relations in which an

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<sup>10</sup> These cases suggest that human-environmental relations are modelled on social relations. However, given that plants and animals are perceived as nonhuman persons, it is arguably misleading to impute a projection of society onto nature to such relational ontologies, where no society/nature divide is recognised (Descola 2013: 107, 123-124, 250).

exchange is conducted. Whereas a gift is an expression and confirmation of a continuing social relation between the giver and the recipient, most money transactions are understood to be concluded the moment payment is made, beyond which no relation exists between the parties in the deal. Money thus serves as a negation – a dissolution – of social relations. By extension, it dissolves our relation to the natural environment. The radical environmentalist worldview, which for decades has extolled the ecological wisdom of Indigenous people, tends to be fundamentally sceptical of money, markets, and capitalism. Its praise of the ecological Native implicitly appears to assume that Indigenous people are free from the insidious injunctions of money. Concluding a book that endorses the public influence of emotional attachments to nature, anthropologist Kay Milton (2002: 150) writes:

The market systematically destroys whatever it cannot encompass. This includes, not only nature and natural things, but also health, family, friendship, spirituality, knowledge and truth.

While not as likely to be articulated by anthropologists today, given the predominance of a neoliberal worldview, Milton's conviction, a mere two decades ago, persuasively identifies the source of the modern condition of alienation that, I have argued, has generated the trope of 'the ecological Indian.'

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# ‘The African family’ in policy and practice: Older women heads of household and the question of intergenerational support in Equatorial Guinea

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**ABSTRACT:** This article investigates how the notion of ‘the African family’ used pervasively in regional policy on old age-related questions, plays out in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea. It does so by looking at the quality of intergenerational relationships from the point of view of older women who are also sole breadwinners in multi-generational households. Drawing from a social gerontological reading of the concept of moral economy, the article examines how cultural representations of womanhood as self-sacrificial motherhood, conditioned the support that older women were expected to give, but also entitled to receive. The article shows how older women and their younger family members dismissed customary duties in favour of personal judgements regarding the quality of their relationships, and suggests that the strategies older women deployed in an effort to cope with intergenerational tensions both exacerbated conflict and amplified the women’s feelings of desertion.

**Keywords:** older women, intergenerational relationships, social gerontology, Equatorial Guinea

## Introduction

The topic of care provision and support for older persons has overlapped with that of intergenerational relationships for much of the history of social gerontological research conducted in sub-Saharan Africa. Early studies, which built on exchange theory, portrayed dependency in later life as a system of intergenerational exchanges in which youths partook for personal benefit, knowing that they too would benefit from the system when they became old.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by modernisation theory, subsequent works argued that factors such as migration and urbanisation eroded traditional forms of social organisation, which resulted in the loss of status of elders, as well as in the dismantling of customary family-based support networks.<sup>2</sup> Pan-Africanist perspectives informed some of these later works, suggesting that solutions to the problems that older persons faced necessarily required the restoration of traditional ways of life.

At the shift of the millennium, talk about modernisation gave way to the rhetoric of development. In developing world ageing debates, international discussions emphasised the

<sup>1</sup> A. J. Shelton’s (1968) pioneering research on Igbo eldership illustrates this approach.

<sup>2</sup> Walter H. Sangre’s (1992) classic article about grandparenthood among Tiriki and Irigwe peoples in Ghana and Nigeria constitutes a beautiful example of modernisation-oriented research.

need for policies “to build on indigenous systems and values of informal family support” (Aboderin 2005: 470). At the African Union’s headquarters, legislators reckoned that “traditionally, Africa’s development has been a result of the strength of the family,” and therefore “building the capacity and resilience of *the African family* to avoid breakage will be an important contribution in the development of Africa” (AU 2004: 3; emphasis mine).

Consequently, when international frameworks such as the United Nations’ *Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing* (2002) and the World Health Organisation’s *Active ageing: A policy framework* (2002) were introduced, regional legislators devised their own instruments for care provision and support for older persons based on ‘the African family’. The African Union’s *Plan of Action on Ageing* (2003) exhorts state actors and other stakeholders: first, to “enact legal provisions that promote and strengthen the role of the family and the community in the care of its older members”; second, to ensure that “legal instruments exist to protect the rights of older people within the family and community”; third, to “develop and strengthen strategies that empower older people to contribute to their families”; and fourth, to “implement policies and programmes that strengthen families and are inclusive of older people” (AU and HelpAge 2003: 15-16).

Today, the notion of the family in Africa, often universalised as ‘the African family’, is still used pervasively in regional policy on old age-related questions. However, the concept of ‘the African family’ in general, and the concept of the family of African older people in particular, both remain poorly defined and under-scrutinised (Aboderin and Hoffman 2015: 284-5; Hoffman and Pype 2016: 2). A lack of concrete meanings has rendered the term liable to loose interpretations and opportunistic mobilisations in contexts where social security systems are weak or non-existent, as is the case in Equatorial Guinea.

In this small West/Central African country, nationalistic discourses have spurred the belief that if precolonial values and forms of social organisation were restored, the myriad of problems that plague African families today would disappear (Akeng in Mitogo 2025). Nationalistic discourses also have shaped normative representations of ‘the African family’ (*la familia africana*), which Equatoguineans envisioned as a large household headed by an authoritative man who is also a successful provider; a home where a man’s female partner(s) is(are) dedicated chiefly to reproductive and domestic kinds of labour; and a place where elders can spend the last years of their lives living comfortably, resting and fulfilling the precious task of instilling the teachings of *la tradición* in their grandchildren.

With little variation between ethnic communities, normative representations of traditional family life portrayed relationships between older people and their younger relatives as harmonious and synergic. These representations construed older persons discursively in an invariably positive way, usually as timeless, contextless figures of moral authority or as collectively cherished repositories of wisdom. Depictions such as these have dominated the books written by members of the educated elite since at least the mid-1980s, but remain widely popular today (Ocha’a Mve 1981: 62; Nze Abuy 1985: 11-12; Nsé Angüe 2010: 224-225; Eteo Soriso 2013: 120, 216).

This article investigates how the notion of ‘the African family’ as pictured in regional policy and nationalistic discourse plays out in Malabo, the Equatoguinean capital. It does so by looking at the quality of intergenerational relationships from the point of view of older women who live in multi-generational homes. More specifically, the article examines

the family life of Mamá Angie, a sixty-three year-old woman from the *krío* ethnic group.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of the article is to show, through a gender-oriented ethnographic account of individuals' experiences, intentions, and motives, first, how members of an Equatoguinean family fulfilled or disavowed normative expectations of intergenerational solidarity, and, second, how the position that older women, as mothers and grandmothers, occupied in the local moral economy, conditioned the kinds of support that they were, in principle, obliged to give but also entitled to receive, at least according to 'the African family'.

### Political and demographic context of Equatorial Guinea

A former Spanish colony for economic exploitation, Equatorial Guinea became an independent nation in 1968. The country's first constitutional president, Francisco Macías Nguema, built his entire political discourse on a certain ethnic Fang nativism, the strategic invocation of which gave rise to *la tradición* – a nostalgia-imbued notion regarding a certain primordial Afro-Bantu way of life that has become lost in time and constitutes the marrow of Equatoguineans' Africanness (Caballero 2023: 30). By mobilising *la tradición*, President Macías projected an image of himself as a strong, proud, 'authentic African' leader as opposed to his adversaries, critics, and intellectuals whom he regarded as 'whitened' individuals, traitors who lost their traditions and now pledged alliance to Western imperialism (Nerín 2024: 166).

Shortly after taking office, President Macías became aware of the economic and administrative weaknesses of the postcolonial state, and opted for complete centralisation. Discourse on *la tradición* helped him legitimise his autocratic rule. All moments of power became invested in his person, yet he was no despot who reigned like a chief, namely through self-serving definitions of the customary (Mamdani 1996: 22-23). As invoked by President Macías, *la tradición* did not promote the revitalisation of any particular precolonial values or ways of life. Instead, it covered up the social fragmentation provoked by the violence of his administration. While *la tradición* supposedly implied a revival of kinship ideology, Macías, in an effort to eliminate any potential dissidents, encouraged youths to denounce their own family members. This practice developed into a virulent culture of denunciation that lives on, and that, some authors maintain, has permanently torn apart the close-family structure of the majoritarian ethnic group, the Fang (Nze Nfumu 2004: 46).

President Macías was ousted in 1979 through a military coup led by his nephew, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, who has remained president of the country ever since. A nationalistic discourse that legitimises, on the grounds of cultural distinctiveness, non-democratic forms of governance in the modern Equatoguinean state, has maintained his authority unscathed (Ocha'a Mve 1985: 38-40). Such discourse is a virtual extension of *la tradición* as Macías once invoked it, but its meanings have changed in significant ways.

One of the first actions that President Obiang Nguema took after ousting his uncle was to call upon a national conference of traditional chiefs (Evuna Owono 1994: 224-232). At this event, he effectively restored the chiefs' dignity and entitlements, which Macías' militant Youths (*Juventudes*) had been trampling for over a decade. In the months that followed, President Obiang Nguema re-established economic cooperation relations with Spain, and

<sup>3</sup> *Krío* is a form of Creole. *Kríos* are the descendants of Fernandinos, a demonym meaning 'from the island of Fernando Po', present-day Bioko.

reinstated the authority of the Catholic Church – an instrument of colonial domination which Macías had proscribed. Through these three actions, President Obiang Nguema consolidated his leadership. He obtained the support of the gerontocrats, the sympathy of the international community, and the gratitude of the Equatoguinean Catholic majority.

National discourse on *la tradición* as it persists today thus has, at its roots, a weak rendition of Fang nativism, but it also incorporates a certain economic mindedness as well as a comfortable partnership between Catholic morality and authoritarianism. This bricolage version of *la tradición* defines the national discourse on gender and local renditions of 'the African family', even if family life in the country hardly resembles the traditionalist ideal.

Today, Equatorial Guinea has a population of 1,594,432, which is divided into a total of 399,533 households (INEGE 2024: 14). The median size of an Equatoguinean household is of 4.0 family members, with households in rural areas being smaller (3.5 members) than in urban zones (4.3 members) (INEGE 2024: 58). In Northern Bioko, the province to which Malabo belongs, 37.0% of all homes are extended households, this is, they are composed by several adult blood relatives of the head of household or his/her partner (INEGE 2024: 59). Mamá Angie's case, which I will examine in upcoming sections, provides an example of life in a typical urban Equatoguinean extended home.

National sources estimate that 64.8% of all households are headed by men, while 35.2% are headed by women.<sup>4</sup> Of the households headed by men, 75.1% are biparental and 24.9% monoparental. When it comes to those headed by women, 20.9% of all households are biparental while a staggering 79.1% are monoparental. The highest level of education that 74.3% of all women heads of household have completed is secondary education, and the most common activity sector in which these women work is domestic service – they account for 88.3% of all workers in this sector (INEGE 2024: 63, 65). Other jobs the women do include independent agricultural ventures, small business initiatives, and street vending. These jobs fall within the category of informal employment, the kind of employment undertaken by 83.0% of the working population (INEGE 2024: 127).

The economic burden that women heads of household bear in monoparental homes is amplified by the fact that they also tend to be sole breadwinners. Family members who are of working age (18-64 years) and might be expected to be successful providers often do not have the possibility to make any significant economic contributions to their households. In 2023, the youth unemployment rate was reportedly 16.35% (TE 2024), yet national sources estimate that only 19.3% of people aged 14-19 received a salary, while 57% had remittances as their main source of income (INEGE 2024: 143).<sup>5</sup> Remittances included family support in cash and kind, as well as an allowance paid from a parent's salary, alimony, or other benefits.

<sup>4</sup> This number is problematic. Surveyors counted as 'head of household' (*jefes de hogar*) anyone whom household members referred to as such, regardless of whether the person in question actually lived in the home (INEGE 2024, 61). Equatoguineans believe that the role of head of household 'naturally' befalls a man, and a home that does not have 'a man upfront' (*un hombre al frente*) is hardly considered a home. This means that a man who is related to, or has a relationship with, a woman, but does not live at her home, will still be referred to as the head of her household. Men who live at home but are unable to make any economic contributions due to inactivity or unemployment will also be regarded as heads of household. This situation suggests that the number of women who are *de facto* heads of household is probably much higher than the statistics show.

<sup>5</sup> Of the remaining 23.7% of occupied youths, 10.9% worked autonomously, 0.5% lived off rents, and 12.3% had other types of income (e.g. migrant remittances).

Besides unemployment, and despite the massive revenues that the oil and gas industry has provided the country since the discovery of oil in the mid-1990s, poverty also remains an acute problem in Equatorial Guinea. With a value of consumption of 8.2 USD per capita per day in PPP 2017, it is estimated that 55.3% of all Equatoguineans live in poverty (INEGE 2024: 175, 171). Poverty levels are higher in rural areas (59.7%) than in urban zones (46.7%). However, the high population density of urban zones has resulted in that more than half of all the poor live in cities (INEGE 2024: 169).

The World Bank places Equatorial Guinea in the group of countries with moderately-high levels of inequality.<sup>6</sup> Relief through international aid, however, is unfeasible for the most part. As a middle-income country, Equatorial Guinea is not eligible to participate in most World Bank and IMF funding programs, and neither is it eligible for the European Development Fund (EDF) given the country's refusal to ratify the revised 2019 version of the Cotonou Agreement due to reservations on the clause on support for the International Criminal Court.

The hardship posed by poverty and unemployment has resulted in a reduction in extended family obligations, as well as a decrease in potential intergenerational economic support. Between 2020 and 2021, the youth dependency ratio in the country increased from 60.5 to 66.7, the elderly dependency ratio increased from 3.9 to 5.4, and the estimated total dependency ratio increased from 64.4 to 72.2 (CIA 2024). While higher dependency and lower potential support ratios seem to indicate that families are facing increasing difficulties in providing support for their younger and older members, the fact that the youth dependency ratio has increased seems to suggest that family obligations are functioning differently from how they functioned before – it is increasingly not the younger generations that support the older ones, but vice versa.

This situation is not new, nor is it unique to Equatorial Guinea. Scholars of ageing in Africa are familiar with the role of carers that older people play in contexts affected by poverty, youth unemployment, and health epidemics such as HIV/AIDS (see e.g. Ardington et al. 2010). Studies show that family life in the continent rarely meets the expectations set by 'the African family'. Ghanaian late life scholar Nana Araba Apt (1993: 301), for example, argues that loose conceptualisations of traditional African extended family organisation tend to overemphasise its structures of support and patterns of solidarity, and she refers to such solidarity as a 'myth'. Drawing from her research among older Abaluyia people in Kenya, anthropologist Maria Cattell (1997: 37, 14) highlights the fact that since what is usually conceived as traditional African family life encompasses at least three generations, much of the support and solidarity that such family life emphasises is expected to take place across generational boundaries. Intergenerational solidarity, writes Sjaak van der Geest (2008: 309), is premised on a kind of reciprocity that, however the younger and older Ghanaians with whom he worked regarded as "the key to security at old age," was of a "whimsical and unpredictable nature". Also based in evidence from Ghana, policy researcher Isabella Aboderin (2005: 146) suggests that shifts in the material support that family members offer older persons, are the product of "a complex interplay between resource constraints and shifting normative ideas." Cameroonian social worker Charles Fonchingong (2013:

<sup>6</sup> The per capita consumption of the richest 10% of the population, 258,000 Central African Francs (CFA) [ca. 410 USD], is more than ten times the value of the consumption of people in the poorest decile, whose per capita consumption is 23,000 CFA [ca. 36 USD] (INEGE 2024: 168).

224) believes that solving the challenges posed by such shifts in material support, requires “a rethink of pension reforms and other direct social assistance schemes that takes into cognisance specific needs of all categories of older people.”

In varying degrees, all of these scholars recognise the inadequacy of ‘the African family’ to fulfil the normative roles of caregiving and support that policymakers have ascribed to it. Yet the means through which the trope is mobilised as part of nationalistic discourse, and the consequences that such mobilisations ultimately have for older persons, are still to be studied in detail. The present article is a contribution to filling this gap in the literature.

### **The moral economy**

While accounting for the normative character of the expectations of care and support presupposed by ‘the African family’, I draw on the concept of moral economy. My approach to the concept differs, however, from the way in which recent anthropological and African Studies scholarship theorise it, namely with regard to the relations between morals and capitalism, with a focus on “how the material economy is morally perceived, constituted, and contested along various vectors of distribution and redistribution” (Salverda et al 2024: 141). Although the strictly economic dimensions of exchanges between persons that current understandings of the moral economy emphasise remain an important component of the forms of support implicit in the notion of ‘the African family’ – not only for what money allows people to afford, but also for the strain that lack of money puts on their relationships – I do not focus exclusively on such economic dimensions.

For the senior women with whom I worked, moral and social kinds of support obviated in talk about ‘the African family’ – being able to rely on others when it comes to practical help with everyday tasks, keeping company, knowing that one is safe, feeling respected and appreciated – were highly important yet rather scarce assets. The women tried to obtain such assets through a constant negotiation of their relationships with relatives and younger family members. A crucial part of such negotiation was daring to question otherwise normative assumptions and expectations, as well as passing judgement regarding the fairness of the demands to which such expectations gave rise.

Insofar as it focuses on how older women dealt with normative expectations of care and support through a negotiation of their relationships with members of the younger generations, the concept of moral economy that I use in this article is akin to the one used in social gerontological research. This reading of the moral economy refers to the notions of reciprocity and ‘fairness’ that, upheld collectively in a given society, are supposedly determinant of moral obligations between age groups (Minkler and Cole 1992: 116-21; see also Hendricks 2005). I do not focus, then, on the morality of an economy, but on the economy of a morality – on the negotiable aspects of interpersonal relationships that a certain moral order structures and defines in a normative manner.

Oriented in this way, a moral economy perspective suits the purpose of this study because it allows for two key considerations: first, consideration of the moral reasoning through which older women and their families justified discrepancies between normative expectations and factual outcomes; and second, consideration of how gender norms influenced the amount of family support that older women were supposedly entitled to receive versus what they in fact obtained. The insights that the moral economy perspective can potentially produce in relation to gender are highly relevant, as the gendered processes

that condition the quality of the intergenerational relationships that older women have, and thus the amount of support that they might receive or be denied, remain key questions for systematic empirical inquiry in contemporary social gerontology (Aboderin 2011: 216).

### **Virtuous womanhood**

My understanding of the moral economy is a substantivist one – it is grounded on the general understanding that the older women with whom I worked, had, of morality. This understanding, I have shown elsewhere (Caballero 2023: 206-223), encompassed notions of relational autonomy, care, respect, and reciprocity, all of which were defined situationally yet taking dominant cultural representations of gender and old age as a point of departure. Such cultural representations pertained, almost invariably, to ‘virtuous womanhood’, the national discourse on gender. I refer to this discourse as ‘virtuous womanhood’ because of the emphasis that it places on the notion of virtue. The discourse built on three historically determinant, fundamentally different, yet conveniently overlapping themes (Caballero 2023: 132-134, 192). The first theme, what some informants referred to as ‘Afro-Bantu’ *tradición*, painted Woman (in the singular, *la Mujer*) as a fertile, strong body accompanied by a weak mind, gendering women in three ways: female reproductive sexuality; domestic division of labour; and female subordination to men on the grounds of Woman’s alleged intellectual and moral weakness. The second theme, Francoist National-Catholicism as represented by ‘The Good Wife’ of Proverbs 31:10-31, foregrounded Woman as a procreator, a good wife, a good mother, a good Catholic, an industrious labourer for the benefit of her husband, and a good citizen for the benefit of the nation. The third theme, Equatoguinean men’s current interpretations of more modern discourses on gender equality, pushed for the idea that in order for a woman to be entitled to demand the same rights enjoyed by men, she first needed to fulfil not only her own roles at home but also the roles of her husband. Fusing these three themes, the national discourse on gender conceptualised womanhood as correlative primarily with wifedom and motherhood as prerogatives for women’s labour. Paramount womanly virtues were industriousness, discipline, economic proficiency, humility, obedience, and selflessness.

National discourse on virtuous womanhood informed the position that women occupied in the local moral economy. It established that being a proper woman – a virtuous woman – was to be a doting mother, and that the primary duty of all good mothers (*buenas madres*) was to sacrifice themselves for the welfare of their children (Caballero 2023: 81). My analysis of Mamá Angie’s family life thus departs from two premises: first, that self-sacrificial motherhood, as determinant of female moral personhood, affected the perception that people, especially men and youths, had of older women heads of household; and second, that such perception had a negative impact on the amount and quality of the support that family members, especially men and youths, were willing to offer older women heads of household.

### **Methods**

The case that I examine in this article, Mamá Angie’s case, is an example taken from a much broader research that I conducted among older Equatoguinean women street vendors in 2017-2018. The research, which served as the basis for my doctoral dissertation (Caballero 2023), documented the hopes, wishes, attitudes, concerns, and interests that a number of

older women with different ethnic backgrounds (Fang, Bubi, Annobonesa, Krío, Ndowé) manifested through daily conversations, relationships, encounters, and experiences at home and in the streets. Recurring themes in the women's conversations included dependency, intergenerational relationships, evil understood both as witchcraft and as state violence, state dishonesty as disseminated through the national media, sexuality in later life as an attribute of gender, and the women's strife toward autonomy in their search for moral personhood. One of the key findings of the study is that national discourse on gender creates a trope of self-sacrificial motherhood that, in turn, fosters relations of negative interdependence in multi-generational homes. Members of the younger generations tend to resent older women's authority, especially when the women are sole breadwinners – an authority that, on the one hand, clashes with the women's widely perceived position of vulnerability as females of advanced age and low socioeconomic standing; and on the other hand, contradicts the 'traditional' gender order that places the authority of a home over a man, a husband or a son. Many older Equatoguinean women – mothers and grandmothers whom people referred to as *mamás* – encountered tensions of this kind every day within their multi-generational homes, regardless of ethnic ascription (Caballero 2023: 76-97). Mamá Angie's family life is representative of many of these tensions, while it also shows the effects that such tensions have on older adults when combined with other common societal issues such as poverty, substance abuse, and health problems related to growing old.

Like the larger ethnographic corpus to which it belongs, I documented Mamá Angie's case primarily through participant observation and in-depth unstructured interviews. Interviews were carried out in Spanish or English, recorded, transcribed, coded, and translated. All participants have been given pseudonyms. I chose to keep Mamá Angie's use of profanity in order to illustrate the nuances she showed in everyday interactions at home.

### **Mamá Angie**

When she and I worked together in 2018, Mamá Angie was sixty-three years old. She had never been married and did not have any biological children, but she had raised a number of nephews, nieces, and foster children. For over fifteen years, Mamá Angie had been selling grilled edibles – pork ribs and chicken – outside her home and, for the better part of that time, the business had been the only source of income for her household.

Mamá Angie lived in a two-story rundown house in one of Malabo's oldest neighbourhoods. The building, which had been in her family for over a century, housed three separate family units. On the second floor, there lived an eighty-year-old distant female cousin with whom Mamá Angie maintained a perpetual quarrel; and forty-five-year-old alcoholic distant niece Sola – an untrained and unemployed single mother of five – together with her children, whose ages ranged between two and twenty-four. The first floor was occupied by Mamá Angie herself, her fifty-something brother Raymond, Raymond's four teenage children – two boys and two girls, Laura and Lola, – and twenty-seven-year-old nephew and foster son Joey. Raymond and Joey were long-term unemployed and thus unable to make any significant economic contributions to the household. Raymond however, helped Mamá Angie with her business, or at least he did so when he was around. Raymond had an active romantic life and loved to party; sometimes a party would take him to other towns, and neither his sister nor his children would see or hear from him for days.

In total, fourteen people lived in Mamá Angie's old family home. With the exception



of Mamá Angie's eighty-year-old cousin, who was supported economically by a member of her own branch of the family, and discounting the 5 kg bags of rice that the father of two of Sola's children would bring to the house bimonthly, everybody living at the house was dependent on Mamá Angie and her grill business. However, Mamá Angie did not consider that all the people who lived at her family home were entitled to depend on her. As far as the *mamá* was concerned, the people whom she was supposed 'to take care of' (*cuidar*) were her brother Raymond, Raymond's four teenage kids, and foster-son Joey. This view left unemployed distant niece Sola and her five children in an unclear situation.

Regardless of her views on who counted as members of her household, Mamá Angie expected that everybody who depended on her business should help in the everyday tasks of prepping, grilling, and selling. Such expectations had a component of need. Mamá Angie was becoming older and she could no longer manage the grill alone. She had terrible pains in her hands and feet, pains that a neurologist she visited said were due to nerve damage after years of daily alcohol consumption, exacerbated by high cholesterol, hypertension, and diabetes. Mamá Angie needed all the help that she could get, yet nobody seemed willing to help her. Why?

### Sola

On Christmas Eve 2017, Sola was helping Mamá Angie tend to the business. She was poking the fire, cutting the ribs, preparing the plates. When after a couple of hours Sola reckoned that she had done enough, she asked Mamá Angie for money, but Mamá Angie said she didn't have any. Mamá Angie had lost the little tin box in which she kept the sales money.

Sola became enraged and accused Mamá Angie of lying, saying that she had lost the money because she refused to give her any. Mamá Angie reminded Sola that, earlier that same day, she had given Sola a 5,000 XAF bill (ca. 8 USD), which Sola then spent on cheap gin. Sola did not deny this, but she was adamant that, after having tended the grill, she was entitled to more cash. The argument quickly turned into insults and escalated, to the morbid amusement of those nearby, to Sola threatening to kill Mamá Angie with witchcraft.

Mamá Angie replied that she had indeed lost the money or that she could not remember where she had hidden it. Her memory was not what it once was. But she also purposefully pointed out that even if she had had the money in her pocket, she would not have given Sola any of it.

"I used to give Sola money, but she would go and spend it all getting drunk," Mamá Angie told me. "She would come home late and could never wake up the next morning. Then, because she couldn't wake up, she couldn't help me clean the meat for selling that night." Mamá Angie paused and looked around, making sure that nobody was listening. "Sola's children would come down and bang on my door so that I would feed them because they were hungry, and their mother wouldn't wake up. I stopped giving money to Sola so that I could use that money to feed her children instead." After a brief pause, Mamá Angie continued: "I tried to take care of Sola's kids. But the more I tried, the more their mother neglected them, and the more the kids started to act like their mother, expecting me to do things for them." Mamá Angie took a deep breath. "The children didn't want to do anything by themselves. And it felt like they too, like their mother, were abusing my will to help them. So I stopped taking care of them. They are not my children. I already raised a whole lot when I was younger. Now I want to take care of myself. I don't want to have to take care of other

people's children.”

By the time the argument had exploded on Christmas Eve 2017, Sola had not been receiving regular money from Mamá Angie, nor was Mamá Angie feeding Sola's children anymore. As a bystander, I understood that Sola was an alcoholic, but I could also see that denying her money would ultimately result in Sola's refusing to tend the grill, even if her own access to food from Mamá Angie's pots depended on keeping the business running. At the heart of the issue was Mamá Angie's failing health. Relying on the moral capital that her seniority bestowed upon her, Mamá Angie responded with scandalised offense every time Sola brought up the question of getting a salary. Sola, cornered by the truth of her dependence and frustrated by the lack of autonomy that Mamá Angie's seniority represented for her, often told me that she felt like Mamá Angie's slave.

### **Laura and Lola**

Mamá Angie reckoned that her nieces, Laura and Lola, had started to behave differently after spending a few months at their mother's house. The girls' mother, a Fang woman who lived somewhere else and had other children with a different partner, had supposedly tried to make Laura and Lola date, for money, a couple of men of her own choosing. Laura and Lola disliked the men and soon moved back into their father's home, but their relationship with Mamá Angie was strained. They now believed that Mamá Angie treated them “like babies” – for example, by setting a curfew – and protested by freezing Mamá Angie out. They did not speak to her, and often pretended that they did not hear whatever Mamá Angie might have been trying to tell them.

One evening, Mamá Angie and I sat outside her home. Laura, who had made plans for the evening but was eventually grounded, tended to the grill in angry silence. Mamá Angie noticed that the fire was too high and instructed Laura to pour some water on it. Laura refused to acknowledge Mamá Angie by pretending that she did not hear her. Mamá Angie sucked her teeth in disapproval.

“I am sick and tired of these people,” Mamá Angie told me. “Here, in this house, nobody likes me. The only person who likes me is my dog,” Mamá Angie said caressing Cocky, her mixed-breed medium-sized female dog, which laid half-asleep by her feet, wagging its tail lazily.

“Why do you say that mamá?” I asked.

“Because it is true. If I die they will be very happy. I try not to think about such things because it makes my blood pressure go up. But sometimes I cannot avoid seeing things,” Mamá Angie said, referring to gestures of passive aggression from her younger family members. “If I have cooked and you come into my house, you will behave in this house,” Mamá Angie reasoned. “Because I have Cocky. Even Cocky has more privilege to eat than they do.”

With Sola refusing to help without being paid, and without the help of Laura and Lola, Mamá Angie's heavy grill could not get lifted, the fire could not get started, it would get late, customers would start showing up, and the ribs would not be ready. This chain of delays meant two things: customers would leave to spend their money at someone else's business, and the selling time would drag on past midnight. Mamá Angie was chronically fatigued, and she had a very low tolerance threshold when it came to being irritated by others. Remaining open until past midnight often had the ill consequence that Mamá Angie

would mistreat a customer, verbally abuse one of the children, or lash out at literally anyone. English words like fool, idiot, stupid, garbage, asshole, and phrases like “fool piece of shit” (*tonto de mierda*) are a few examples of the expressions that Mamá Angie used every day while talking to, or yelling at, her younger family members.

### Joey

While conflicts with Sola, Laura, and Lola were everyday occurrences, most of Mamá Angie’s troubles had to do with her nephew and foster son Joey, whom Mamá Angie had raised as her favourite child, and who was now a twenty-seven-year-old untrained and unemployed marijuana enthusiast.

One evening, I arrived at Mamá Angie’s home and the entire house was dark. The only source of light in the compound was a little yellow lightbulb shining high above the grill on the sidewalk. Mamá Angie was living in darkness and the food she stored in her freezers was spoiling because when she sent Joey to pay the electricity bill, he pocketed the money instead.

Joey felt entitled to the money that Mamá Angie made because, in his view, she was withholding resources that belonged to him, his siblings, and his cousins. As born-in-wedlock children, Mamá Angie and her brother Raymond were two of the four legitimate heirs to some plots of land that had been in the family for at least three generations. Mamá Angie and Uncle Raymond were trying to divide the land in smaller plots in order to sell them, but the paperwork was a maze and lawyers were beyond the family’s budget. Whenever Mamá Angie and Uncle Raymond managed to sell a small plot, buyers would pay in meagre monthly instalments. Payments would arrive with frustrating irregularity, and the money alone was never enough to keep the household running during periods when Mamá Angie fell sick and could not sell.

Joey had grown up aware of the existence of that family land, and he was constantly at odds with Mamá Angie because he felt entitled to it. Joey contended that, if he could sell a portion of the land, he could use the money to start a business of his own, a shisha bar. Mamá Angie was sceptical. She understood that Joey was an addict and worried that he would use any business he started as a front to buy and sell the illegal drugs that he consumed. But even if Joey’s intentions to run a legitimate business were real, Mamá Angie also knew that Joey, who sometimes would not leave his room for days on end, lacked the discipline necessary to administer a business.

Caught in a never-ending feud over money and land with Joey, raising her deceased relatives’ children was a decision that Mamá Angie had come to regret. “I’m tired! I’m tired!” Mamá Angie once cried out loud in her perfect English, following an argument with Joey. “He’s a good-for-nothing, he is just another asshole. I regret, *I regret* looking after everybody’s children. It is something that nobody should ever do in their life. *Nobody*. It’s not worth it. It doesn’t pay. They don’t thank you. They are all ungrateful sons of bitches.”

### Mamá Angie’s project

“Do you know how I feel?” Mamá Angie asked me one day, following a particularly harrowing argument with Joey. “I don’t have a family. I don’t have friends. In fact, I am completely alone.”

“You feel that you don’t have a family because you support the people who are supposed to be your family, but they don’t give you any kind of support, or...?” I asked her.

“Sometimes I wish I’d die.”

“Don’t say that, mamá.”

Loneliness and feelings of desertion were an excruciating result of the intergenerational tensions that Mamá Angie endured at home. As a strategy to cope, the mamá was devising a plan that would allow her, in principle, to live as if she lived on her own.

One afternoon, Mamá Angie dragged me into her bedroom, saying that she wanted to show me her “project.” As soon as I entered Mamá Angie’s room, I was awestruck by the sight of a massive industrial fridge, the kind restaurants use to exhibit sodas, standing by the side of her bed. Mamá Angie had moved the old fridge from the area of her grill business into her bedroom so that she could lock the door and prevent her nephews, nieces, and Joey from helping themselves to the food stored in it. Mamá Angie was tired of everyone eating the food that she bought for her business, but the problem went far beyond a few tomatoes.

Unlawful borrowings were a common occurrence at Mamá Angie’s multi-generational home. Mamá Angie had ‘lost’ many things over the years: money, radios, televisions, mobile phones (a *lot* of mobile phones), a laptop, jewellery, expensive hair extensions, and even her cooking pots. “When they take my things, I don’t notice it. It is when I want to use them that I find them gone.”

The fact that the people who ‘borrowed’ her things often refused to even speak to her, infuriated Mamá Angie. People did not help her, they constantly ignored her, and on top of it all, everybody in the house was stealing from her. Aware of this situation, Mamá Angie tried to set personal boundaries. Moving the industrial fridge from the grill into her bedroom had been part of her efforts toward this end.

Certainly, Mamá Angie’s attempts at setting personal boundaries did not help her obtain the kinds of support that she needed. On the contrary, Mamá Angie’s efforts further alienated her from her nephews and nieces. This alienation was a price that Mamá Angie appeared to be willing to pay in exchange for maintaining a sense of dignity. She did not like feeling lonely, but feeling that people were taking advantage of her was something that she liked even less.

Confessedly having made peace with the idea that she would most likely never receive the kinds of support that she needed, Mamá Angie worried about what would happen, how the family would live, when she could no longer tend to her business. Above all, Mamá Angie worried about her brother Raymond, whose party lifestyle of heavy drinking and smoking had started to weaken his health, giving him a cough from which he could not recover. “I’m tired,” Mamá Angie sighed. “Even Raymond has told me that I need to rest. But then I start thinking, ‘How will we manage?’ And I tell my brother, ‘You have no woman. Your children are worthless. If I stop selling, who will take care of you?’”

## Discussion

The notion of ‘the African family’ to which regional policy and Equatoguinean popular discourse allude, is premised on a certain (semi)deontological understanding of morality that sees, as the precondition for being ascribed moral personhood, the successful fulfilment of one’s duty toward the community, particularly one’s family members (Menkiti 1984: 180; Ikuenobe 2015: 1008). In Malabo, women’s duties were defined by the national discourse on

gender, which exalted an ideal of self-sacrificial motherhood. Proper women were, above all, good mothers, caregivers and providers, inextinguishable sources of nourishment for others (Caballero 2023: 81). The willingness and success with which older women, as mothers and grandmothers, fulfilled these duties, determined the position that they occupied in the local moral economy, and also the degree to which others ascribed moral personhood to them.

The older women with whom I worked, as Mamá Angie exemplifies, did not agree with the normative expectation that mothers and grandmothers should be, because of their gender, inextinguishable sources of nourishment for others. They did not regard self-sacrifice as a (grand-)motherly duty, nor did they consider that the fulfilment of such a duty would ultimately determine their moral worth as women or as persons (Caballero 2023: 209-211). Women like Mamá Angie dismissed, as did their family members, the notion of customary duty in favour of individual judgements about reciprocity and fairness, and they made these judgements by assessing, in a personal manner, the quality of their family relationships.

This does not mean, however, that values pertaining to ‘the African family’ have no relevance in shaping people’s attitudes. Like Mamá Angie did, older persons might invoke normative values such as the authority that seniority concedes them, yet the way in which said values shape people’s attitudes is not prescriptive. Mamá Angie’s invocation of the principle of seniority was accompanied by despotic attitudes toward younger family members whom she considered disrespectful – attitudes that shaped, in turn, her family members’ passive aggressive behaviours toward her.

As a determinant of older women’s position in the local moral economy, gender plays an important part in configuring intergenerational tensions. Local representations of gender and the ‘traditional’ duties that people associated to the condition of ‘being Woman’ (*ser Mujer*) annulled the entitlements that ‘the African family’ attributed to elders. Mamá Angie should have felt, as an older person, entitled to a certain degree of dependency at home. As a woman, however, she instead found herself fighting unspoken yet prevalent norms that, by portraying women as self-sacrificial motherly providers, allowed younger family members to rob her of personal effects and money whenever they felt that she was withholding resources to which they, as her children, were entitled. When Mamá Angie had to rely, against her will and because of her advanced age, on her nephews and nieces, they punished her by refusing to help. Ongoing, deeper-running conflicts that originated from the youths’ unwillingness to recognise the moral authority that Mamá Angie, a woman, had over them as an elder and as a provider, authorised the teenagers’ feelings and, at least in their own view, justified their actions.

Condemned by the national discourse on gender to a perpetual ethos of self-sacrifice, older Equatoguinean women tended to experience people around them as unwilling to reciprocate. In light of this experience, the women often felt that their family members were taking advantage of them. They understood that they were expected to take care of others, but who would take care of them? These women, in an effort to care of themselves, and as a means to protect their sense of self-respect, would try to opt out of what they considered unfair or oppressive family relationships. As older women tried to stop being a *mamá*, the people who depended on them became confronted with the facts of their dependence – they developed feelings of frustration, resentment, and anger, which when expressed, exacerbated older women’s experience of loneliness and desertion. In the face of outcomes such as these, the principle of normative relationality that undergirds widespread assumptions regarding

the solidarity inherent to 'the African family' proves to be a significant contributor to social suffering, as well as a major source of stress for older persons.

## Conclusion

Portrayals of 'the African family' as an ideal provider of support for older persons do not fit actual experiences of family life in Equatorial Guinea. What ultimately determines the amount of support that older women receive is the quality of their relationships with family members. In multi-generational households led by older women who were also sole breadwinners, intergenerational relationships were based on a local moral economy in which women, as mothers and grandmothers, were condemned to a perpetual ethos of self-sacrifice. Women's position in the local moral economy allowed men and youths to reconcile notions of fairness with the unreciprocated support that older women provided. Older women felt taken advantage of, but their strategies for coping generated, instead, more loneliness and feelings of desertion. The humanistic strand of gerontology in sub-Saharan Africa would benefit from studies that document this paradox further, as well as from analyses that consider the different vulnerabilities to which local discourses on gender expose older persons.

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# Unwilling participation: The political entanglements of ethnographic research

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**ABSTRACT:** Drawing on my research about Jordanian politics and interactions with the country's intelligence services, this article reflects on instances where the ethnographer becomes less of an observer and more of a participant in the political landscape under study. Specifically, I aim to highlight how moments when a researcher does not just observe but rather gets involved in a political system, often against his or her will, can put features of that system into sharper relief. In such situations, difficulties and mistrust should not be seen merely as obstacles. Rather, they compel the researcher to sort out similar problems as our informants sort out and to learn about the most effective way to do so. Relations of trust might be the best way to get access to a field, but thornier relations reveal more about its inner dynamics.

**Keywords:** Intelligence services, research assistants, participant observation, public anthropology, Jordan

## Introduction

I had not really reflected on the possibilities – and risks – of being a participant, not just an observer, of Jordanian politics until an interviewee asked me to send my research findings to the royal court, the centre of the country's political power. At the time, I was conducting research in Maan, a desert town and provincial capital in south Jordan, which had been relatively isolated from the rest of the country until a university was established there two decades ago, which brought students and academics from all over Jordan. Other institutions, most importantly the military, had also long gathered Jordanians from all over the country, but universities have now overtaken the army as the most important nation-building institution, and – as Jordanians with experience in both civil and military life insist – they build a nation in a vastly different way. What this interviewee, a former president of the university, suggested I submit to the royal court was not that type of information, suitable for academic publications. It was rather a type of information that would be highly inappropriate to make public but surely more politically relevant than anything else I had written about Jordan.

In this article, I want to reflect on these and other situations where one becomes less of an observer and more of a participant in the political landscape one is studying. More precisely, I want to highlight how situations when a researcher does not just observe but rather gets involved in a political system, often against one's will, can put features of that

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system into sharper relief.

Several anthropologists have emphasised the value of a more politically committed and morally engaged form of anthropology, for example as a precondition to gain access to the daily lives of political activists (Razsa 2015), or as a means to deepen our understanding of a community by participating in its social life more fully (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 411). More broadly, the idea is that anthropology should be more actively involved in addressing public issues and engaging with the world – to the benefit of both the societies in which we work and of the discipline itself (Low and Merry 2010; Kirsch 2018).<sup>1</sup>

The type of political involvement I am interested in in this essay is not that kind of voluntary commitment but rather the kind of involvement into which one is inadvertently drawn. It is characterised by an often frustrating lack of control that involves obstacles, or potential obstacles, to conducting research. These obstacles might include mistrust that the fieldworker needs to deal with, to gain access to the field, or political ambitions of a research assistant that make it more difficult to conduct interviews together. This type of involvement does not conform to the fieldwork ideal of achieving ‘good rapport’. Instead, it is marked by difficulties, misunderstandings, and mistrust, which appear as problems precisely in contrast to the ideal of more harmonious relationships. But even though such problems can threaten the fieldworker’s access to places and interviewees, they also offer insights into the inner dynamics of a political field.

The benefits and risks of such political involvement have been extensively analysed by anthropologists working in settings of war or polarised conflict (e.g., Finnström 2008: 19; Nash 1976). In such contexts, it is difficult to be accepted as an impartial observer; fieldworkers are often identified as either friend or enemy and are easily drawn into the dynamics of the conflicts they study. This can include exposure to physical danger or even direct violence (Mahmood 2008).

In contrast, my reflections are based on fieldwork in Jordan, known as the most stable country in the Levante, and thus from political involvements that lack direct danger and that attract less attention. I focus on three such involvements: becoming a springboard for the political ambitions of a research assistant, writing of non-public reports (like the one I was asked to produce in the vignette), and interactions with the intelligence services.

The significant role of research assistants in ethnographic research has long been a focus of methodological reflection. Seminal works have pointed out that ideal research assistants or key informants often occupy a somewhat marginal position within their societies (Rabinow 1977; Turner 1970). As outsiders, they have an awareness of what for most people is just the “seen but unnoticed backgrounds of their everyday affairs.”<sup>2</sup> In Victor Turner’s famous

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<sup>1</sup> Another way to describe the surge of interest in so-called engaged anthropology is to focus on the fading away of a competing idea: The notion that there is an inherent conflict between objectivity and ethical commitment. The belief in this contradiction is still very alive in disciplines such as political science but has largely lost value in anthropology. Commitment is seldom, at least not in itself, seen as a threat to the scientific status of a work, and the question more often becomes in which way commitment can benefit research, or what the institutional obstacles are to an anthropology that is more engaged in public issues.

<sup>2</sup> This is one reason scholars have taken transgenderism as a privileged vantage point for studying how sex and gender are enacted in everyday life (Kulick 1998: 10). In his classic study of transvestites, Harold Garfinkel argues that they “have as resources their remarkable awareness and (un)common sense knowledge of the organisation and operation of social structures that were for those that are able to take their sexual status for granted routinised, ‘seen but unnoticed’ backgrounds of their everyday affairs” (1967: 118).

discussion of one such outsider, Muchona, whose reflections on Ndembu's religious and social world were pivotal to Turner's attempts to understand it, Turner emphasises Muchona's distance from political struggle: "Living as he had done on the margins of many structured groups and not being a member of any particular group, his loyalties could not be narrowly partisan, and his sympathies were broader than most of his fellow tribesmen" (Turner 1970: 134). In this line of thought, reflexivity goes hand in hand with political detachment.

As mentioned earlier, anthropologists working in conflict zones have noted that such distance is impossible. Fieldworkers often have to collaborate with individuals who are directly involved in the violent events they seek to understand (Hoffman and Tarawalley 2014). Such collaborations are a condition for gaining access, placing the anthropologist in a position where he or she must understand the field through someone who is a political player in it, with all the difficulties that entails.

Instead, I want to make a point about collaborations with political actors that also applies outside of conflict zones. If ethnographers are 'using' research assistants, the reverse is also true: they use us, and when the assistant is a political actor, the way he or she uses the ethnographer reveals something about the political field he or she is part of.

Another form of political involvement I discuss – writing for a restricted audience – has received less analytical attention. One reason for that is that the ethical status of such writing has been deeply questioned. "Make Your Results Accessible," is one of the principles in the American Anthropologist Association's statement on ethics. A major concern has been the use of anthropological research by military or intelligence agencies, for example during Project Camelot in 1964, a Pentagon program for developing counterinsurgency strategies, and more recently during the American occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan (Gonzales 2008; Price 2011). The involvement of anthropologists in intelligence gathering was a central concern behind the American Anthropologist Association's first statement on ethics (adopted in 1971) and led to a clear condemnation of the publication of any secret reports (Price 2016: 29-31).<sup>3</sup> Beside the ethical concerns, there was a fear that such practices would harm the international reputation of the discipline, making it harder for ethnographers to gain the trust of the communities they study.

Nevertheless, outside of academia, there are of course many genres of professional writing where the texts are not made public. "During the late 1970s and early 1980s, as more anthropologists found employment in applied settings outside of universities, increasing numbers of anthropologists were uncomfortable with [the ethic code's] restrictions on such activities as writing 'secret' reports" (Price 2016: 31). Academics interested in writing policy briefings, white papers or expert opinions for political organisations must accept that such writing sometimes cannot be distributed beyond a limited group. Secrecy might actually grant a certain freedom to that type of writing: an organisation that requests a written product are usually more open to challenging findings if they are not made public. Using an example from Jordanian politics, I will reflect on the difficulty of limiting the audience and on what that difficulty says about political power.

The final relationship I will examine is that between fieldworker and intelligence services. While anthropologists gather information about the communities we visit, their institutions – particularly their intelligence services – gather information about us. Through

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<sup>3</sup> The statement was titled "Principles of Professional Responsibility."

our actions and words, we inevitably communicate with them, and it is these interactions that we now turn to.

### Explaining what you are up to

“It is important for the researcher to carefully explain the purposes of the research project in terms that are comprehensible,” Kathleen DeWalt and Billie DeWalt (2010: 44) write in their guide for fieldworkers: “[Anthropologists] often find that if they do not actively present themselves in an appropriate role, the community may assign them to an inappropriate one”. In research about politics in Jordan, researchers must consider how to present themselves not only to the community but also to the intelligence services. What makes this particularly challenging is that the intelligence services never talk to you directly, and in the rare cases they do, they do so incognito.

When I conducted fieldwork during the Arab Spring in Jordan, interviewing oppositional political activists, my research assistant did this presentation for me. He was from one of the country’s most influential tribes, with relatives holding high positions in the army and government. Officials at the intelligence services came to him – not me – with questions about my activities in the country, and I was protected by the symbolic capital of his tribe and family. I was, as Jordanians put it, ‘his guest’. The way I communicated with the intelligence services was through my choice of research assistant.

That my research assistant was from an influential Jordanian tribe coloured that communication. While more than half of the Jordanian population have their family origin outside the country, especially from Palestine, this group has weak political influence. The important political and security institutions (e.g., the parliament, army, intelligence services) have been dominated by Jordanians who are members of the tribes that were present in Jordan when the country came in to being in the 1920s. Tribes that held a leading political position at that time have often maintained that position until today, and many prominent contemporary politicians are descendants of people who were tribal leaders at the time of the country’s foundation (Alon 2016).

Many of the people I have worked with in Jordan take pride in being part of entities they refer to as *‘ashira* (plural *‘ashair*), which they would translate into English as ‘tribes’, ‘clans’, or ‘families’ (Shryock 2021: 512). An *‘ashira* always has a specific name and typically includes several thousand members. It normally has multiple *diwans*, buildings where people gather, especially for social activities. Moreover, an *‘ashira* “asserts a special relationship to physical space, or territory, or patterned movements through both; it has a known history, which its members tell in relation to, and in opposition to, other *‘ashair*; its structure is segmental, or nested, with named groups embedded in named groups, sometimes using a genealogical idiom, sometimes an idiom of alliance” (Shryock 2021: 512). Partly due to the weak role of political parties in Jordan, tribes are the most important organisation in political elections. They select candidates, form coalitions with other tribes, and organise election campaigns – most members of the Jordanian parliament have won their seats through this process. Tribes have evolved under the influence of social and economic change, as well as shifting state policy (Massad 2001; Watkins 2014), and they have in turn influenced the development of the Jordanian state.

While military coups and civil wars have been common in the region, Jordan has remained stable – it is the only state in the Levante where the ruling elite has been intact

through the transition to independence (Tal 2002: 126). One pillar of the monarchy has been its alliance with the tribes. According to the historian Yoav Alon, this alliance can be traced to the slow integration – rather than violent subjugation – of the tribes into the emerging Jordanian state that developed after the first World War. Tribesmen got a greater stake in the existence of the state and the regime in Jordan than in most other Middle Eastern countries, where the common result of state-formation was “the coercive subjugation of the tribes accompanied by their marginalisation in society” (Alon 2009: 1-2). Tribesmen – who are heavily overrepresented in the military and intelligence services – have stayed loyal to the regime when there have been threats of military coups.<sup>4</sup> This support has also granted the tribes, particularly the larger and more influential ones, a degree of independence from state power. The royal court is cautious not to alienate them, as doing so could risk turning people in the army and other important institutions against the king. In other words, the intelligence services treated my research assistant as someone they could trust and had to respect.

My indirect communication with the intelligence services was important for my ability to conduct research in the country. Jordan is a monarchy where most political power is vested in the king, but much of this power is, in practice, delegated to the intelligence services (*al-mukhabarat*), especially since the current king ascended the throne in 1999. Although the intelligence services regularly intervene in politics, they very seldom do so through violent methods. Instead, they tend to employ tactics such as buying out leaders of an opposition group with government jobs, making sure that job opportunities are withdrawn for people who participate in protests with radical demands, or encouraging divisions within opposition groups. The regime is known for its (by regional standards) liberal ways of dealing with opposition and the freedom it allows researchers. What was at stake in my communication with the intelligence services was not my safety but my access to the field.

I also had other indirect ways of communicating with the intelligence services. During most of my field trips in Jordan, I have tried to present myself in an appropriate role by always starting my fieldwork with interviews with senior officials or politicians, such as members of parliament, university presidents, or senior officials at ministries. My aim has been to establish the fact that I am a researcher, before turning up in more sensitive contexts. Moreover, when I have met people in such positions of power, I have tried to present my research ideas in a way that portray Jordan in a favourable light. One Jordanian researcher I worked with had advised me to do so. “[That way of presenting the project] is not a lie,” she remarked, noting that my research did, in fact, put Jordan in a positive light. But it was a matter of emphasis. She called it flattery.

What the effect of all this has had, I cannot know for certain, but I do know that the intelligence services have an image of me, and that that image has helped during incidents that might otherwise have jeopardised my fieldwork, or at least restricted my access.

One such incident was the spreading of a rumour that I had Israeli or other dubious

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<sup>4</sup> The Jordanian monarchy has relied on the support of these tribes – and their role in the military – when Nasserists, Bathists, Arab Nationalists and National Socialists sought to overthrow it in the 1950s and 1960s, and when Palestinian *fedayeen* (commandos) sought to replace it during the period of 1968-1971 (Mishal 1978). Nevertheless, since the reign of the present king, an increasing number of tribesmen and military veterans have started to think that the regime does not fulfil its side of the bargain. For instance, the Jordanian protest movements that emerged during the Arab Spring were strong in the provinces outside the large cities, among people from the Jordanian tribes, the traditional backbone of the Jordanian regime (Schwedler 2022; Tell 2015).

connections, which happened during my last field trip at the university in Maan. The instigator of the rumour was a professor at the faculty of education, who, for reasons unknown to me, had already spread other rumours about me during my previous visit. I was conducting research on how the establishment of the university had affected local society, and I attended lectures, socialised with staff, and conducted formal interviews with staff and students. In the evenings, I tried to see as much of the local society as possible, speaking with a wide variety of people. In other words, I was engaging in the kind of ethnographic work that anthropologists normally do.

That the anthropologist is a spy working for a foreign government is perhaps the most common suspicion anthropologists face during fieldwork. This is partly due to striking similarities between how ethnographers and intelligence operatives gather their information – the close observation of everyday life, attention to broader context, and desire to blend in (Borneman 2009: 240; Verdery 2018: 17-18). “How you work,” a man who worked as a consultant for intelligence communities in the Middle East once told me, “is similar to how we work,” drawing a contrast between that type of work and methods that are less immersive.

The rumours that I was a spy rather than a researcher never started to fly, however. This was partly because an official at the university did her best to dispel them. She had been receiving me at the university, reviewing my letters of recommendation, and introducing me to staff and students. When people shared rumours about me being a spy with her, “I tell them that everything is official [that I had all the formal approvals from the university in Maan],” she told me.

The deeper reason the rumour never started to fly, however, was that people did not really have to be suspicious, because the intelligence services handled that work for them — one of their tasks is, of course, to scrutinise the activities of foreigners. Katherine Verdery, writing about her fieldwork in communist Romania during the Cold War, notes that the constant surveillance by the intelligence services affected all the relationships she made in the field, even though she did not realise that until many years later, when she read the file they had had on her. The intelligence officer was present in any conversation she had, like a hidden third party, sometimes directly involved with her respondents, sometimes “just a hidden possibility they might fear” (Verdery 2018: 19). It was a surveillance that eroded trust.

In my case, however, surveillance had the opposite effect, making it easier for people to trust me. As the official at the university who defended me noted, the intelligence services would “tell us if there was a problem.” They had contacted her in other instances, for example, to prevent a visitor who would give a talk at the university. I continued to get access to the interviews and information I asked for, and the knowledge that the intelligence services had vetted me was a kind of watermark, making that access possible.

Another time, a coincidence put me in a difficult spot. Early on during one of my research trips, a friend of mine – hearing that I was interested in recent changes in Jordan’s education sector – recommended that I interview a retired school principal, whom she had heard about. We arranged a meeting, and I took a taxi to his home, where we conducted the interview. The principal was very politically opinionated, but from my perspective, the interview was somewhat disappointing. However, the next day, he did something that might have affected my work far more than a lacklustre interview. He posted allegations of high-level corruption in Jordan on his Facebook page. This certainly gave the intelligence services the impression that I might have encouraged him to make that post, and the following day,

a man who claimed to work at the hotel I was staying at began asking me detailed questions about what I was doing in Jordan. I was worried but put on a smile, stated my research purposes, and emphasised the senior officials and politicians I was about to meet.

What makes this type of impression management a way to learn about Jordanian politics, and not just a precondition for studying it, is that the researcher is forced to deal with questions of communication tactics that also political activists, at least several of the leading ones, must deal with. These activists think about how to communicate not just with ‘the people’ but also with intelligence services, and there are various ways to approach this communication, as the following story illustrates.

A Jordanian democracy activist, one of my long-time informants, had gotten admitted to a ‘political leadership’ program in the United States, and while there, he took every opportunity to meet senior American officials and politicians and posted photos of these meetings on his Facebook page. I first thought that he did this to gain status, but I later learned that there was a political strategy behind it: “It is for the *mukhabarat* (the intelligence services)” he told me. When they “see me in photos with these people (e.g., Henry Kissinger),” he reasoned, they will not dare to “do something against me” (e.g., stop his political activities), because they will fear that “I have very prominent political connections.”

This tactic backfired, however. After having established an NGO in Jordan and working with education programs for the country’s political parties for a year, he learned from a relative that a section within the intelligence services saw him as a problem and had been interfering with his work for a long time. They could not understand his intentions and were suspicious of his American support. He realised that, despite Jordan’s alliance with the United States, an important part of the regime was suspicious of the country’s ambitious political intentions in the Middle East, and he had gotten associated with Americans who were too influential, creating the impression that he was involved in some kind of American strategy for the country. He tried to weaken his association with the superpower, by finding work in a small European country with a less ambitious foreign policy agenda, such as Norway or the Netherlands. He still thought about how to present himself to the intelligence services — no longer to show that he was a person one should not mess with, but rather to give a soothing answer to the question of what he was up to.

### **What is in it for the research assistant**

“In our experience,” Kathleen DeWalt and Billie DeWalt (2010: 45) write, “some of the first contacts [in a new field] are often made by people [...] adept at discovering what resources the researcher might have and how those resources can be diverted to themselves and their families.” My most recent research assistant, Rosol – an administrative employee at the university in Maan and a campaign worker in the parliamentary elections – was adept at discovering opportunities that came with having a researcher around. He worked for me a few hours each week, arranging interviews, but what he most sought was neither money nor any other material resource but, in the word he used, ‘relations’. When I conducted interviews he had arranged, he always insisted on hanging around, even if he did not do any talking. He also wanted to be present in the interviews I arranged myself with influential people. “Why did you not call me!?” he asked when I told him I just finished an interview with a former mayor. “Did you mention my name, that a guy named Rosol al-Abbat is helping you?” he asked after I met the university president. Since I aimed to create an

atmosphere where the interviewee felt safe enough to speak very openly, I experienced this constant search to be present as a problem.

Also in other situations, Rosol's ambition to build connections was evident. He once recounted how, during a trip to the capital, he had tried to enter a meeting at the Lions Club. He was wide-eyed with astonishment as he walked toward the entrance, passing a fountain, gold ornaments, and other signs of wealth. When the guard saw him, he seemed puzzled and asked who he was. "I am a public employee from Maan [which is a backwater]," he said. The guard had looked down at him dismissively and wagged with his hand: "Away." Rosol laughed when he told the story, then stressed: "Imagine if I had been able to enter! The people inside. Ah!" I asked what he would have done. "Going around taking phone numbers. And there might be an old woman to marry."

I chose to work with Rosol, but it might be more accurate to say that Rosol chose to work with me. I met him when I was visiting the university, going around the campus to conduct interviews with students and staff. Like most other staff I met, Rosol invited me for a coffee at his office and asked what I was doing in Maan. He was keen on establishing contact and suggested we meet again. In this regard, by no means did he stand out from other people I met. A few students approached me asking if I could help them practice English, others were interested in migrating to Europe, and a few just wanted to interact with a Westerner (I was the only one living in Maan at that point). Some academic staff were interested in potential collaborations with my Swedish university. Rosol, however, stood out because he was particularly good at reading what I wanted and understanding how he could help me with that. He suggested some people I should meet, and hearing that I was interested in how elections worked, he started sharing stories from his experience working on election campaigns. He was adept at establishing a relationship that would be beneficial for both of us.

In Jordan, as in many other places, people believe that strong personal networks and relationships are essential for securing a good job and for social advancement more generally. Rosol, as mentioned, was engaged in Jordanian politics, where the concept of 'good relations' and the ambition to get them have a more specific meaning. In parliamentary elections in Maan, one can only win through the support of one's tribe, and when I asked people which qualities they look for when they select the candidate of their tribe, the most common answer were "wealth and good relations."

Having good relations is partly about being social, which includes attending weddings and funeral wakes and helping people with various problems. Through these actions, candidates build the impression that, once in office, they will serve what is called the 'general interest' (*maslaha 'ama*) rather than their personal one. Candidates spend time convincing people that they are a good person rather than that they have a good political program, which is a reflection of the role of the Jordanian parliament, which cannot propose new legislation, and of the absence of strong political parties. Without a party's established reputation to rely on, candidates must build their personal reputation as trustworthy individuals. Having 'good relations' is thus about building trust among the electorate – about showing that you will work for the benefit of those who vote for you.

Having 'good relations' also means having connections with influential people, which enables a politician to provide services to the electorate. The ideal politician is a 'fixer' – someone who can make things happen and solve problems through his connections.



Politicians spend much of their time taking phone calls from constituents who present various requests and then reaching out to others who can fulfil them. These requests might involve anything from gaining access to medical services, getting a transfer to a workplace closer to one's hometown, or solving any type of bureaucratic obstacle. The higher position someone has, the better services he can provide.

To provide services, one needs strong relationships with people who hold decision-making power. A member of parliament ideally has good relations with key figures – like government officials, business leaders, and senior officials at embassies – before they get elected (Clark 2018: 22). Even candidates for the city council – considered a position of minor importance – often have over 1,500 phone contacts. A portion of these contacts are individuals who can fulfil various requests, typically through their roles within the state bureaucracy.

The Arabic word for a connection that can help one in this way is '*wasta*', derived from the word for 'medium' or 'middle'. Having *wasta* means having someone who can intervene on one's behalf, for instance to secure a job at a private company, a better price when renting a house from a private person, or any favourable decision from the state bureaucracy. Jordanians commonly complain about the widespread use of *wasta* – according to a survey conducted in 2015, over 80 percent of Jordanians considered *wasta* a form of corruption, and two-thirds believed it was essential for finding a job (National Council for Family Affairs 2015, cited in Doughan 2024: 132). Despite these negative attitudes, few people would relinquish using a good *wasta*. Politicians, once elected, are expected to assist their constituents through *wasta*. In some districts, members of parliament have an office dedicated to *wasta* requests (Doughan 2024: 137).

Having good relations is of course partly about inheriting them; most leading politicians in south Jordan have fathers or grandfathers who held a position of influence. But it is also a social capital that one can increase through skills and talent. "Some people love relations," a kingmaker of one of the largest tribes in Maan told me, as he was evaluating the four contenders vying to become the tribe's candidate for the parliamentary elections. "Others are like a shell." The ideal candidate does not just have good relations but is intent on improving them.

Relations can also be improved through hard work. At least a year before the parliamentary election, candidates make intensive efforts to be visible at social occasions, like weddings, by showing up in person, sending someone with a gift, or at least giving a phone call to express care. Others try to improve their networks by appearing to be relevant to people of influence, and finding a way to hang out around them can be a first step to do so. In other words, Rosol's interests to use me as a springboard to improve his relations rested not just in his personal ambition but in a recognised form of political art.

### Writing about the field

Employees at the university in Maan asked me to provide written recommendations, based on my experience at Swedish universities, of ways to improve the institution. When asked for my opinion, I have usually answered that one of the most important improvements would be to professionalise the university further: addressing the tendency to give better grades to students who are from the same tribe or area (or have relatives who are in a position to ask for it), ensuring that appointments and promotions are based on merit rather than

recommendations from influential people outside the university, taking stronger control over the budget to address the university's rapidly growing debt, and so on. But writing about this would involve trade-offs between impact and safeguards.

First, in the choice of language, English or Arabic. In Jordan, English is a safe language for writing about anything that might otherwise be sensitive, such as issues involving the royal family or the country's relations with Israel. A reformist leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, who was working on a doctoral dissertation in Islamic studies when I last met him, had decided to write it in English. He was criticising an influential religious ruling (fatwa) issued by a 14<sup>th</sup> century scholar – a ruling he believed was intolerant toward other faiths and lacked a basis in the Quran. But by criticising such a famous religious scholar, he might upset people. Writing in English, he explained, made him feel freer, as only two people at the faculty would be able to read it! The price of freedom is irrelevance.

Second, in the depth of the analysis. Many people working at the university were committed to further professionalising the institution, and they were the ones who provided me with detailed information and insights on the matter. They described various forms of cheating and mismanagement occurring beneath the surface and pointed out which presidents had tried to make improvements and which ones had taken a passive role, allowing problems (and the university's debt) to grow. These were often the same individuals who encouraged me to write recommendations for improving the university. They probably thought that my status as an outsider and a researcher from a European university might be helpful for their cause. It was a cause which I sympathised with, and I could have drafted a set of recommendations based on their extensive experience working at the university.

A more penetrating analysis would ask why one of the presidents who tried to professionalise the university was dismissed. And the answer to that question was very different from what the employees who looked up to him assumed. They believed he was ousted because his efforts to enforce rules and policies had created enemies among the staff, but I found out that the real reason was that his playing by the book had included refusing to grant favours to influential political figures – for instance, declining to promote someone at their request – which made them intent on destroying his career and tarnishing his reputation. The story of his dismissal involved events at the national council responsible for evaluating university presidents, the intelligence services, and the national bureau for combating corruption.

When this former university president, whose reputation had been severely damaged by these events, asked me to send my research findings to the royal court, I would have been able to combine what I had learned about the political intrigue surrounding his dismissal with what I had seen on the ground, to provide a report that might have been politically relevant, at least relevant for the prospects of that former president.

By doing so, I would risk getting in over my head. If I submitted that report, what might happen? The more detailed – and thus more relevant – it would be, the riskier. Even if I avoided naming specific individuals as far as I could, some of them would have been easy to identify. One of them, a very prominent politician who had played a leading role in ending the term of the university president, belonged to a powerful family – he was the son of an influential politician, with sons or nephews likely to 'inherit' his influence one day. When I had visited his house, I met his younger sister, who held a senior position at the royal court. I calculated that she, or anyone else in the network clustered around such a prominent

figure, would surely notify him. And if they started spreading a false rumour about me, who could counteract that? The former university president? His tribe was not one of the leading tribes of Jordan, not a Majali, Tarawneh, or Bani Sakher. That his enemies had successfully tarnished his reputation showed that he had not been able to muster tribal support, even though he told me that he had threatened them to do so. Passivity was surely the less risky option. I postponed submitting any text.

And there I was, engaging in the kind of calculations that I had – only indirectly – seen Jordanians engage in when facing an irregularity connected to an influential person. In this situation, I was dealing with what Andrew Shryock and Sally Howell (2001), writing on Jordan, have called ‘house politics’, “a mode of domination in which families (the royal one being only the most central and effective) serve as instruments and objects of power.” Shryock and Howell have noticed that while public historiography in Jordan emphasises the state, nation, and government, “in less formal contexts, when Jordanians talk to us (and each other) about their own political history or the contemporary political scene, they dwell on the interests of prominent men and their households, the importance of kinship ties, family connections to power, and the bane (or just as often, the blessing) of rampant nepotism” (2001: 249-250). As the case of the dismissed university president illustrates, this form of politics can be the actual force behind events that, on the surface, may appear to be driven by issues like mismanagement or resistance to institutional reform. In my case, this more fundamental level of politics only appeared when I risked getting involved in it.

### **Difficulties that are an asset**

My aim in this essay has not been to question that trust and good rapport are suitable ideals of fieldwork. It was certainly easier for me to work in Jordan than in the more repressive environment of Syria (where I conducted fieldwork in 2010), and like many other anthropologists, I achieved most progress during fieldwork when I met people who understood my objectives and were interested in similar issues. My point is that the absence of trust and good rapport is not just the absence of a bunch of good things. It is something else (Carey 2017: 2; Massa 2016). And that something else presents, for all its problems, also some opportunities.

An ethnographer’s involvement with a political system can put aspects of that system into sharper relief, and I have used situations where I was more of a participant than an observer to illustrate aspects of the Jordanian intelligence services, candidate selection for parliamentary elections, and house politics. In such situations, difficulties, mistrust, and even adversity do not necessarily pose a problem; rather, they insert the ethnographer more firmly in a political dynamic and force him or her to sort out similar problems as some of our informants are sorting out. Relations of trust might be the best way to get access to a field, but thornier relations reveal more about its inner dynamics.

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## PERSPECTIVES







# Swedish PhD Dissertations in Anthropology and related disciplines 2020-2024

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## Introduction

A main purpose of *kritisk etnografi* – Swedish Journal of Anthropology is to offer a window for and a visibility of anthropological research carried out at or in collaboration with Swedish universities. This is all the more important in times of a changing academic landscape, in which ethnographic research is not any longer limited to Anthropology, and where anthropologically oriented research is oftentimes produced outside of the discipline of Social and Cultural Anthropology.

Four Swedish universities have PhD-programmes in Social or Cultural Anthropology: Gothenburg, Lund, Stockholm, and Uppsala. In addition, anthropologically oriented dissertations are produced within inter-disciplinary PhD-programmes at the universities of Linköping, Uppsala, and Malmö, as well as in Rural Development at the Swedish University for Agricultural Sciences (SLU).

In the following list, we have included PhD Dissertations in Social and Cultural Anthropology defended in Sweden 2020-2024. To some extent, we have added anthropologically oriented theses defended outside these PhD-programmes in Social or Cultural Anthropology. In total, we have compiled 31 theses in this list, thereby covering six Swedish universities: Gothenburg, Linköping, Lund, SLU, Stockholm, and Uppsala. Although we have been quite open-minded when it comes to the inclusion of anthropologically oriented theses, we might have overlooked some. In the list, we have mentioned the national research subject (*forskningsämne*) as defined in the official record.

For a complete list of PhD Dissertations in Anthropology at Swedish universities in the last 20 years, we also refer to Sveriges Antropologförbund (SANT) – the Swedish Anthropological Association – that compiles all PhD dissertations at its website (<https://www.sverigesantropologforbund.org/>).

## 2020

**Brandshaug, Malene K. 2020.** *Liquid Landscapes: Human-water interactions and water scarcity in Yanque, Peru*. Research Subject: Social Anthropology. School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg.

In the farming district of Yanque in the Southern Peruvian Andes, everyday life revolves around acquiring enough water for irrigation. This thesis concerns water scarcity and focuses on a range of water management practices. Based on ethnographic fieldwork

conducted among small-scale farmers from January to December 2016, the core chapters of this thesis scrutinise how water is searched for in physical and bureaucratic landscapes; how it is captured in canals, reservoirs and fields; and how it is paid *to and for* through offerings to earth-beings and through money transfers to the state and water organisation. By paying attention to human-water interactions, the thesis not only explores what people do with water, but also the variations in what water is, becomes and does in Yanque. Hence, this study is situated within an anthropology concerned with more-than-human relations. In an Anthropocene world marked by increased water scarcity, *Liquid landscapes* also addresses the relation between national and regional politics of water governance and local water management. It argues that a historical continuity of water scarcity in Yanque is exacerbated by environmental changes concerning disappearing glaciers and irregular rains, as well as by a continued coloniality. The thesis shows how indeterminacy is created in political spaces, in the mountain and valley landscape, and through emotion and affect. Furthermore, by describing and analysing heterogeneous practices that Yanqueños prove to be remarkably skilled in navigating and evoking, the thesis seeks to move beyond what can appear to be opposing water realities. *Liquid landscapes* concludes that by enacting water as a sentient person *and* as a passive substance, Yanqueños do not simply adopt the dominant way of valuing water as an object to be used efficiently. Rather, they creatively combine divergent water management practices, use distinct yet entangled irrigation infrastructures, and make relevant multiple versions of water to deal with water scarcity. Moreover, the thesis ends by holding that although Yanque farmers are especially vulnerable to environmental and ecological changes, which are intensified by inequalities and marginalisation, the indeterminacy of their water situation is not only characterised by vulnerability and uncertainty, but also by strength, creativity and possibility.

**Cole, Tomas 2020.** *Possessed Earth: Ownership and Power in the Salween Peace Park of Southeast Myanmar*. Research Subject: Social Anthropology. Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University.

In the wake of seven decades of protracted revolution and armed conflict in Southeast Myanmar, an ensemble of indigenous peoples and transnational activists have begun formulating a radical alternative vision of how peace and conservation might be achieved in practice. Through translating and rescaling indigenous modes of possessing the earth, this ensemble is working to transform 5,000 km<sup>2</sup> of highly contested terrain in the highlands along the Salween River into a conservation zone they call the Salween Peace Park.

In this study I explore what indigenous practices and cosmologies, and the ways they are being translated and rescaled into the Salween Peace Park, might teach us about ownership, sovereignty, and politics at large.

The first half of this study focuses on the highlands along the Salween River, to explore how people residing here commonly treat their landscapes as already possessed, in the dual and entangled senses of being both occupied or haunted by spectral more-than-human presences, and controlled and owned by them. In these Possessed Landscapes human ownership of land is always ephemeral, ultimately nesting in the encompassing ownership of spectral presences (who I describe as persons). Humans can only borrow land by constantly negotiating with and propitiating its spectral owners. A corollary of these indigenous modes of possessing the earth is that these highlands were not so much anarchic as in sense of “no

ruler”, but rather, power and sovereignty is nesting in the hands of the spectral owners of the earth. I describe this as an alternative mode of politics that I name Spectral Sovereignty. In the second half I take a small step back to shuttle between the residents of these highlands and networks of activists based in Chiang Mai in Thailand. Here I focus on both growing new forms of dispossession and counterinsurgency that have accompanied the cooling of armed conflict, and efforts by ensembles of indigenous peoples, activists, armed groups, and conservationists to attempt to push back and re-territorialise and re-possess the earth. I go on to explore how this ensemble is subtly translating and rescaling possessed landscapes and spectral sovereignty into land laws and conservation policy as a way to transform these former war zones into a protected area, the Salween Peace Park. I then show how, in the process of establishing this protected area, these activists are continuing the revolutionary movements to attain greater autonomy for the indigenous people residing here. I then close this thesis by exploring what is happening as the Salween Peace Park is coming into contact and being negotiated on the ground in these highlands. Here we find revolutionary politics and spectral sovereignty are becoming entwined into a form of Alter-Politics that is unsettling established notions of sovereignty and politics. However, beyond unsettling, it also gestures towards alternative ways of understanding the shifting entanglements between people, politics, spectres, and other unseen more-than-humans, and radical alternatives to conservation and armed conflict in Myanmar, and beyond.

**Granlund, Stefan 2020.** *The promise of payday: exploring the role of state cash transfers in post-apartheid rural South Africa*. Research Subject: Rural Development. Department of Rural and Urban Development, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences.

During the last two decades, cash transfer programs have become a significant tool across low and middle-income countries in efforts to reduce poverty. However, there is a paucity of studies on beneficiaries’ own perspectives and lived experiences of cash transfers as well as potential long-term productive effects on livelihoods.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the material and socio-relational implications of state cash transfers for impoverished populations in rural South Africa in a changing livelihood context, using the Child Support Grant (CSG) as case. The CSG is an unconditional cash transfer to improve child wellbeing for households living in poverty. Material and socialrelational implications of the grant are explored through combining household surveys with all (273) households in two rural villages in the Eastern Cape Province with interviews and observations. The surveys, conducted in 2016, followed up a previous similar survey from 2002, which was before the CSG reached these villages. Drawing on literature on cash transfers, livelihoods, and social justice theory, including the two interlinked concepts of redistribution and recognition, the study points to the importance of both material and symbolic redistribution in strengthening livelihoods and social justice.

The thesis reveals that in a context of rising unemployment and declining cultivation in the two villages, social grants have both protective and productive effects on livelihoods. The results show how the recipients used the CSG strategically for making small improvements to their livelihoods over time. The study also shows that the CSG has strengthened women’s autonomy and dignity and has reduced gender inequalities at household level. However, the CSG did not lead to significant improvements that could eradicate poverty in the long term.

This thesis further studies state-citizen relations and the contentious character of social grants in rural South Africa. There is a growing sense of entitlement to the CSG among recipients, while sentiments of grants being a form of charity exists simultaneously. The thesis concludes that the encounters with state bureaucracy primarily are avenues where CSG recipients see the state, enact a form of agency and gain recognition, which contributes to a sense of citizenship. In conclusion, the CSG is not simply an economic transfer of cash, which keeps individuals in households and communities afloat, it also becomes part of, and reshapes, social relations. The potential for recipients to gain recognition of their status as citizens is an important symbolic implication of social grants.

**Helmfrid, Sigrun 2020.** *Cotton and Cabaret: Domestic Economy and Female Agency in Burkina Faso*. Research Subject: Social Anthropology. Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University.

This study investigates the functioning of the domestic economy of smallholder cotton farmers with the overall aim of interrogating female agency, based on ethnographic fieldwork in Burkina Faso in the mid-1990s. The thesis addresses the following interrelated research questions: How were the smallholder domestic economies organized and how did they function? What were the mechanisms for economic inequality and social stratification? To what extent did women benefit from cotton farming? What economic strategies were available to women? And finally, how could female agency be conceptualized in relation to the domestic unit under male headship? Permeating the analysis is the insight that domestic economies of many West African farming societies consist of separate but interconnected economic domains, the “common” economy of the farming unit and the “individual” economies of its male and female members. It demonstrates that women have vested interests in both the common economy and their individual ones, since women’s individual undertakings, to a large extent, are motivated by their gendered responsibilities towards the domestic group. The study argues for an agency concept that captures the different modes in which women exercise agency, both as individuals and as members of social bodies.

**Martin Galan, Vanesa 2020.** *Living in times of climate change. Weather-related understandings, realities, and entanglements among Guarani people in the Bolivian Chaco*. Research Subject: Social Anthropology. School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg.

Since climate change became an issue of public concern worldwide, the weather has attracted increasing attention and come to stand as a common ground for joint action between Indigenous people and governmental and non-governmental actors in the Bolivian Chaco. Despite becoming a common cause, the management of weather through mitigation and adaptation strategies takes place under ontological differences and power imbalances. Accordingly, it poses problems of sidelining non-modernist comprehensions, conceptualizations, and enactments of what is known as weather, and of displacing indigenous world-making practices on behalf of climate resilience. These problems have been latent even during the Morales Government, despite being inspired by the ideals of de-colonization and *Vivir Bien*. Based on eleven months of fieldwork conducted in two Guarani communities between 2015 and 2016, this thesis explores Guarani weather-related reality on “its own terms,” and considers its entanglement and power interplay with the State, modernity, and climate change issues during what might be the last period of the

Morales' administration. Drawing inspiration from research, working under the umbrella of the so-called "ontological turn" in anthropology, this thesis takes difference seriously, moves away from dominant assumptions about weather and climate, and engages in a relational perspective that looks at the complex and dynamic relationships between people and their surroundings and at the interconnection of the spheres of social life. Inspired by Latin American studies of coloniality and modernity, this study also draws attention to oppressive aspects and power interplays that shape indigenous lifeworlds and world-makings. By approaching the particularities and radical differences of Guarani people's lived experiences, understandings, practices, and social relations concerned with "weather," this dissertation contributes to bringing the radical alterity that the dominant climate reality eclipses to the fore. While, by addressing the partial connections, entanglement, and power interplays of local "weather" issues with the Karai world and with the dominant context of climate action, this dissertation shows how Guarani reality becomes articulated with the Karai and is accordingly enacted under broader and coercive socio-political conditions that discourage the emergence or strengthening of multiple/alternative worlds.

**Rosén, Linus 2020.** *At the limits of state governance: territory, property and state making in Lenje Chiefdom, rural Zambia*. Research Subject: Rural Development. Department of Rural and Urban Development, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences.

African state property regimes – embedded in a racialized structure of land ownership that stretches back centuries – are at the center of contemporary land struggles. At present, the Zambian government is appropriating 'traditional land', controlled by chiefs and headmen molded through colonial rule, in an effort to bring it into the fold of 'modernity'. On paper this process appears as a powerful state-building project. Yet on the ground it is riddled with legal contingency, with land survey beacons appearing unexpectedly on people's doorsteps, and chiefs finding themselves torn between asserting their sovereignty and maintaining recognition by the state

This thesis examines the material and conceptual remaking of chiefly lands as constitutive of new forms of exclusion and political authority. Yet, instead of focusing on the 'achievements' of state power, analytical attention is placed on the creative ways state governance is subverted by chiefly obstruction, insubordinate peoples and unruly nature. Drawing on long-term fieldwork and archival research, the thesis argues that the process of 'state making' and its effects are inseparable from the myriad material practices that thwart state power. A conceptualization of 'boundaries' is developed to capture how relations of stately and chiefly power operate on an unstable political landscape. The analysis knits together insights from legal pluralism, political ecology, critical geography, anthropology and postcolonial theory in a grounded reading of everyday forms of state formation that captures how colonial histories and spatialities intertwine with present-day politics.

Building on this analytical foundation, the thesis links up four case studies of 'state making': (I) the colonial racialization and sedentarization of African bodies, and their refusals to conform to colonial territoriality, (II) the government enclosure of a forest repeatedly reoccupied by chiefly authority (III) the emplacement of survey beacons on village land, and their demolition by local inhabitants, and (IV) the promotion of statesanctioned title deeds on customary land, and their reinvention as implements of chiefly control. Each case makes visible the fissures of state power and how creative people exploit indeterminacies

to resist eviction and reassert their claims to home and land. Through a recognition of 'ordinary people' as political protagonists, fully capable of contestation and critique, the thesis shows how marginalized people continuously test the limits of state governance, and how such practices are not 'irregularities' to otherwise effective performances of governance, but crucial political enactments that constitute new forms of property, territory and an uneven and variable state.

## 2021

**Elmi, Nimmo Osman 2021.** *Digitalising Tax, The Kenyan Way: The Travels and Translations of ITax in Kenya*. Research Subject: Technology and Social Change. Department of Thematic Studies, Technology and Social Change, Linköping University.

Kenya, as with other developing countries, has joined the global bandwagon of using digital technologies to increase domestic revenues. Within the new strategies, lie great potential in achieving sustainable development, however, the shift is happening quite rapidly and has been made mandatory within a short period of time. The implications of this shift have prompted this research to analyse how it has shaped tax practices in Kenya. This study addresses the implementation strategies of an e-filings system, ITax in Kenya that was piloted, adopted and made mandatory in a short period of time. ITax as demonstrated in this dissertation has led to complexities including shifting tax expertise from tax consultants to information and communication technology (ICT) experts. I analyse what is at stake for all actors involved from those who commission its use to the taxpayers. I also analyse whether Kenya was prepared economically or infrastructurally for this shift. The outset for this dissertation is models like ITax interface with the different interests of social/institutional worlds as it travels and gets translated generating complex and unintended effects. This study therefore combines postcolonial and technoscientific approaches in order to understand how the current implementation of ITax is connected to colonial development and fiscal rationale. Methodologically, this dissertation contributes to the socio-cultural perspectives to studying tax.

**López, Elisa Maria 2021.** *Transforming Kiruna: Producing Space, Society, and Legacies of Inequality in the Swedish Ore Fields*. Research Subject: Cultural Anthropology. Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University.

Extractive resources industries are irreversibly transforming land, air, water, life and society around the world at an unprecedented rate, and Sweden is no exception. This anthropological study analyzes acute issues related to this transformation: the resettlement of six thousand residents of the city of Kiruna due to ground deformations caused by large-scale iron mining by the Swedish state-owned company LKAB (Luossavaara-Kiirunavaara AB). The thesis explains how mining, the dominant mode of production in the Ore Fields (Malmfälten) region, establishes particular social relations, structures of power, and conceptual models of space, nature, and society. I approach these relations and ideas through the perspective of space, and show how space in Kiruna is produced through social processes, material infrastructures, symbols and meaning-making in support of extractivism, the political and economic prioritization of resource extraction. The empirical basis of the work is fifteen months of ethnographic field research in Kiruna between 2012 and 2015. The analysis relies on theories of space in Anthropology and Geography, as well as

ideas from settler colonial studies. A central argument in the study is that despite official representations of the city move as a “social transformation”, the physical, conceptual, and social production of space extends material and social inequalities integral to extractivism. While all city residents are affected by the insecurity and risks of extractivism, which the city move revealed, the Indigenous Sámi community is uniquely affected. Sámi from the Kiruna area have historically been subjected to colonial policy, limits on their subsistence economy, displacement from land, and harmful stereotypes. However, Sámi have also continually resisted such limitations and stereotypes, adopting diverse forms of work to support reindeer herding (including mine work), establishing urban community spaces, and documenting and preserving local cultural landscapes. The move of the city reveals that such legacies of social inequality, which have been a part of the establishment of mining, persevere in social relations, ideas, and material architectures that form space in and around Kiruna. Providing ethnographic detail and analysis of the reproduction of extractivism and its inherent inequalities in spatial practices, this study contributes to the anthropological literature on space, resource extraction, and social inequality.

**Norsted, Kristian Sandbekk 2021.** *Subjects of Feminism: The Production and Practice of Anxiety in a Swedish Activist Community*. Research Subject: Cultural Anthropology. Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University

Anxiety is a zeitgeist of our time. The range of themes to which anxiety attaches today are truly vast, but anxiety arises and is cultivated in specific ways among different groups of people. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the capital of Sweden, Stockholm, in 2017 and 2018, this thesis explores the role that anxiety plays in contemporary feminist activist culture. The thesis focuses on several salient features of that culture: the cultivation of safe spaces and separatist rooms for women and nonbinary people; the place and role of male feminists in the community; how the activists translated the academic concept of intersectionality into an activist practice; and some of the creative ways in which individual feminist activists dealt with anxiety. Theories emphasizing how safety has become a primary cultural value, as well as how we have collectively unlearned to live with uncertainty, shed light on the anxiety that proliferated in the feminist activist community I discuss. Contemporary anxiety is also partly explained by theories stressing the ways in which society has become uncertain in novel ways in the wake of neoliberalism. Among the feminist activists I came to know in Stockholm, collectively devised strategies to do good cultivated a particular social dynamic that rendered individual feminist activists anxious. How might they take personal responsibility for the revolutionary ambitions of feminism? How can they avoid excluding any potential subjects of feminism? What happens if they say or do something that upsets or offends other feminist activists? This thesis examines the relationship between collectively devised strategies to do good and the resulting production of anxiety.

**Pasquini, Mirko 2021.** *The Negotiation of Urgency: Economies of Attention in an Italian Emergency Room*. Research Subject: Cultural Anthropology. Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University.

Urgency in a hospital Emergency Room (ER) is not a self-evident state. Urgency is made, by establishing priorities, distributing attention and material resources, and deciding who and what needs to be attended to first – and, simultaneously, who and what has to

wait. The process of determining urgency is known as “triage” (from the French verb, *trier*, “to choose”).

This thesis is about the vicissitudes of triage in an Italian ER. Based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork, the thesis explores what happens when urgency is at stake; when it is contested and caught up between different, and frequently conflicting, perspectives. It explores how urgency is determined in practice, and shows how triage always is a vulnerable process of negotiation guided by economies of attention.

How is urgency actually shaped in interactions between patients, their families and friends, and the ER staff? The different chapters explore how time in the ER is created through shifting registers of attention, and how attention in the ER is affected by widespread economic and social precarity, and neoliberal national policies of governance. It discusses how triage increasingly is structured by attitudes of mistrust; and also by potential or real outbreaks of violence.

Addressing the particular positioning of the ER as a thick space of conjunction between neoliberal state politics and people's increasing need for care and recognition, the thesis aims to contribute to medical anthropology literature by analyzing triage not as a neutral medical way of sorting, but as a practice that actively creates difference. It explores both the limits of triage, and how those limits can spark improvisation and creative reinvention.

**Rasmussen, Nika 2021.** *Embodied Citizenship in the Making: Bolivian Urban Youth at the Crossroads of Social Hierarchies*. Research Subject: Cultural Anthropology. Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University.

This thesis analyses the body as a nexus for playing out power relations and feelings of belonging. Based upon twelve months of fieldwork amongst young urban people living in La Paz and El Alto, it examines the connections between bodily conceptions, social hierarchies and societal inclusions. During the fieldwork in 2014-2015, Evo Morales and his MAS Party had been in power for almost a decade. The young people had thus grown up with the “process of change”, the project of decolonizing the society and building a plurinational state. This served as the study's backdrop.

The material shows that despite the government's “process of change”, old and discriminatory structures and notions prevailed amongst the youth. Social hierarchies and the production of differences were integral parts of their everyday life. The young people, engaged in an organization working for sexual and reproductive rights, navigated complex and contradictory norms and values in a conflictive socio-political landscape. With political practices at the micro-level of everyday life, they questioned, negotiated and reproduced old notions and developed their political subjectivities. The topic of sexuality emerged as a particularly intense site for interrelational struggles between adults and young people. A new political position surfaced, claiming space in the nation's body politic – the political subject of youth. The study of youth fruitfully unravelled social and political developments and adults' interests, highlighting constructions of temporalities and the need to consider age.

The thesis makes evident how notions of race, class, gender, age, sexuality and place *materialize* bodies. Some bodies merged with salient norms, whereas others “stood out” and felt “out of place”. It is suggested that the relationship between society, state and the individual is productively studied with the framework of “embodied citizenship”. Embodied citizenship is theoretically and analytically uncovered by linking projects of



nationhood, how belongings at different societal levels and social hierarchies are produced and interrelated, together with an intersectional gaze on power relations. This elucidates that citizenship is an ongoing, embodied and lived experience in everyday life. It develops in relation to social hierarchies and projects of nationhood whose inherent power relations work to materialize bodies.

## 2022

**Garis Guttman, Maryam 2022.** *Förändring och kontinuitet: Giftermål, släktskap, identitet och generationsskiften i den assyriska diasporan.* Research Subject: Social Anthropology. School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg.

Denna avhandling undersöker uppfattningar om släktskap och giftermål bland assyrier i Sverige, i relation till gruppens diasporaidentitet. Den tar sitt avstamp i historiska processer under mitten av 1970- talet vilka tenderar påverka ungdomars vardagsliv för att sedan fokusera på hur en ny syn på kategorin ungdom och normalitet tar form. Därefter ringas ungdomars uppfattning om giftermålstraditioner och släktskapsrelationer in, men också hur de ser på sin sociala och etniska identitet. Syftet med avhandlingen är att kasta ljus över sociokulturella förändringar bland assyrier i Sverige och deras innebörd för den enskilda individen men också för gruppen som helhet. I förståelsen av förändringarnas omfattning har utgångspunkten varit i parallella processer som inte är helt oberoende av varandra, nämligen hur synen på släktskap, giftermål och ungdom i mötet med det svenska samhället har tolkats och omtolkats och därigenom fått annorlunda innehåll och innebörd. Den relevans giftermålet och släktskapet hade i hemlandet skiljer sig i många avseenden från den betydelse dessa institutioner kommit att få i Sverige. Äktenskapet kännetecknas inte längre av tidiga och arrangerade giftermål och patriarkatet som ideal håller på att omvärderas av många i den yngre generationen. Den etnoreligiöst baserade endogaminormen har skiftat i Sverige och håller på att luckras upp, då dess betydelse för reproduktion av religiös och/ eller etnisk tillhörighet inte är lika viktig bland en del unga medlemmar. På liknande sätt har synen på ungdom bland assyrier förändrats och anpassats till de förhållanden som råder i Sverige, processer som ungdomar sedan ankomsten till Sverige varit med och påverkat i en viss riktning. Det organiserade inhemska föreningslivet inom gruppen öppnade under gruppens första tid nya möjligheter för ungdomar i allmänhet att på ett konstruktivt sätt bryta mot vissa normer utan större konsekvenser, till exempel att inte vilja gifta sig med den av föräldrarna utvalde. Många föräldrar fick en ny konkurrent som de inledningsvis försökte bekämpa men som de fortsättningsvis kom att betrakta som komplement i vägledning av de unga. Från omkring 2010 och framåt har familjen, primärt kärnfamiljen, återigen kommit att spela större roll än föreningen i ungdomarnas liv och svenskfödda ungdomar håller på att förhandla om föräktenskapliga förhållanden och annat som begränsar deras frihet. Familjen anses stå dels mellan individ och kollektiv, dels mellan det svenska samhället och det assyriska kollektivet. Utifrån att det ställs krav på familjen från dessa skilda håll har den fått en ambivalent funktion i Sverige: å ena sidan förväntas den att upprätthålla kulturella normer och ideal och å andra sidan förväntas familjen från både ”svenskt” håll och från deras barn att visa förståelse och acceptans för sina barns uppväxt i det svenska samhället och det assyriska kollektivet. Avhandlingen visar hur familjens roll skiftat över tid och successivt övergått ifrån att vara en ”traditionsbärande” till att vara en ”förändringsvänlig” institution, präglad av bilaterala släktskapsband. Därtill praktiserar många assyrier svenska traditioner

som exempelvis kulturella och religiösa högtider på sitt eget sätt, i vad som skulle kunna beskrivas som ”mixkultur”. Allt fler börjar också i vissa sammanhang att identifiera sig som svensk-assyrier. Alla dessa kulturella förändringsprocesser har lett till en förändrad syn på den etniska och sociala identiteten. Vilken aspekt av dessa identiteter som lyfts fram beror på inbördes relationer i varje given situation. Nyckelord: Socialantropologi, assyrier, bilateral, diaspora, dubbelidentitet, endogami, familj, förändring, giftermål, ideal, kontinuitet, normer, patrilinejär, patriarkala traditioner, släktskap, svensk-assyrier, svenskar, ungdom.

**Johansson, Simon 2022.** *Comeback Detroit: The return of whites and wealth to a Black city.* Research Subject: Social Anthropology. Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University.

Since the 1950s, the city of Detroit has declined in terms of demography and economic prosperity. Once among the wealthiest and largest cities of America, Detroit now continually ranks as one of nations poorest, Blackest and most abandoned urban areas.

This dissertation studies urban change by focusing on the emergent reversal of the city’s long-term decline, exploring the period of time when both whites and wealth were returning to the city. As this moment of return is closely aligned to local notions of “comeback” and that the city was “coming back”, the thesis examines the reflections and contestations of the city’s contemporary comeback and the relations of power that frame this process.

The first part of the thesis examines how the city has changed in the past, and the ways in which this past has furnished particular understandings of the present. Racial and class struggles have defined the city’s trajectory and these struggles have shaped a cosmology of division and separation, informing everyday life and mundane relations, while being mirrored and expressed through the material city. In the second part, the thesis concentrates on the temporal, spatial and demographic dimensions of comeback and the emergence of a “New Detroit”; a city that is whiter and wealthier than before. By examining the subjects said to be returning, and how both the city’s spaces and futures are molded around them, the study inquires into how comeback and a New Detroit is made to emerge.

The third part of the thesis explores how Detroiters come to labor collectively, through ritualized events, with a city that is changing. It is in ritualized events that Detroiters come to experience diversity and community, integrating what is otherwise divided, while articulating both morality and legitimacy in relation the city’s comeback.

**Kristiansen, Mathias 2022.** *The Greatest Scam: Network Marketing and the Economization of Everyday Life in the United States.* Research Subject: Social Anthropology. School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg.

This thesis examines how neoliberalism has penetrated the everyday life of middle-class Americans, leading to new forms of living and new collective understandings of the capitalist economic order. In order to understand how neoliberalism has penetrated the everyday life of middle-class Americans, I conducted one year of ethnographic fieldwork among people participating in network marketing, a form of sales that also includes the recruitment of additional salespeople – what is known as building a network. Network marketers do not receive a salary or direct commission; they generate income through recruitment of customers and salespeople. This structure encourages network marketers to rethink their social relationships in financial terms, reframing their personal connections as

opportunities to earn money. Network marketing is a particularly strong case to illustrate neoliberalism in the United States because it epitomizes core tenets of neoliberalism like individual responsibility and entrepreneurialism, while also illuminating how a financial logic has replaced employment as the ideal pathway to middle-class life. This is emerging as part of the large-scale economic transformation from post-war regulated capitalism to neoliberal capitalism which has created intense economic insecurity and inequality for many people in the United States. I introduce a framework called the neoliberal economization of everyday life to analyze how mundane aspects of daily life – social encounters, routines, and modes of self-representation – become saturated with a capitalist economic logic. I demonstrate how the economization of everyday life naturalizes economic inequality and fosters social relationships dictated by a capitalist logic, which limits other non-economic aspects of human life that bind people together.

**Lacbawan, Macario 2022.** *The Burden of Responsibility: Predicaments of Environmental Life in the Caraballo Mountains, Northern Philippines*. Research Subject: Cultural Anthropology. Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University.

Indigenous people are not obviously, or naturally, stewards of the environment. But when the idea that they are such custodians gains legal traction, and when indigenous land-use practices are codified to reflect environmental principles, they become a burden of responsibility that has significant consequences for the lives and the livelihoods of indigenous communities.

This thesis is about Ikalahan people of the Caraballo Mountains in Northern Philippines and the vicissitudes of their obligation to the environment. Based on twelve months' ethnographic fieldwork, the thesis explores what happens when the legal recognition of Ikalahan people as an indigenous group demands that they re-fashion their ancestral land from a place where they practice swidden agriculture into a space where they are supposed to ensure environmental conservation. It explores how the Philippine state utilizes scientific knowledge such as cartography and forestry to facilitate the expulsion and estrangement of Ikalahan people from their land even as it relies on those people to maintain their ancestral land as an exclusive ecological sanctuary.

How do Ikalahan communities enact this environmental responsibility, and how do they contest it? The different chapters explore how villagers deploy the cultural power of shame to impose ecological obligations, how they also create tactics to evade and subvert such obligations, and how they use the rhetoric that the land should not be monetized to, precisely, monetize it. The chapters also discuss how traditional moral principles provide a means for Ikalahan people to both understand and facilitate the economic inequalities that have emerged since their land was transformed into an ecological zone.

By addressing how Ikalahan communities negotiate the consequences of their legal recognition as indigenous people, the thesis contributes to the expanding literature that shows how indigeneity is not a neutral label, but is, rather, a potentially burdensome positionality whose attachment to the environment is anything but straightforward.

**Matai Manjate, Fernando 2022. SOMETHING GOOD BUT NOTHING TO BE PROUD OF: Inheritance and Succession Practices, and Sociopolitical Stakes in Times of Decentralization in Marracuene, Mozambique.** Research Subject: Cultural Anthropology. Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University.

This ethnographic study focuses on inheritance and succession practices and sociopolitical stakes in present-day Marracuene in southern Mozambique. It explores how in contexts of rapid economic, social, cultural and political change, individuals, social actors and institutions deal with inheritance and succession rights, both when the property holders and incumbents are still alive and after they have passed away. Besides exploring legal processes, this study approaches inheritance and succession as social, cultural, economic and political processes.

The study is based on twelve months of fieldwork, and, to a lesser extent, archival research. It focuses on inheritance and succession through five entry points. First, the study looks at how people deal with inheritance and succession rights pertaining to their own life situation. Second, it explores cultural understandings, as well as different strategies and arguments mobilized to secure and safeguard inheritance and succession rights. Third, the study investigates how individuals anticipate what is going to happen with inheritance and succession after their passing. Fourth, it explores how in global, national and local arenas rights and interests of traditionally weak social actors, such as widows and orphans, are defended and protected from disinheritance and dispossession. Fifth, the study analyses the extent to which local inheritance and succession practices relate to, and are influenced by, ongoing sociopolitical transformations, such as decentralization and urbanization, in Marracuene.

Ethnographically, the study describes and analyzes actual inheritance and succession practices and strategies of individuals, kin groups and various sociopolitical institutions. The study furthermore describes and analyzes local politics, notably in relation to decentralization processes, so as to analyze the practical implications of the fact that chieftaincy and other community-based positions are nowadays defined as “community authorities,” according to the Mozambican state law.

The findings show that there are general principles of inheritance and succession: a man is supposed to transfer inheritance to his wife and children and to be succeeded by his eldest child. However, such principles are often overruled, which can lead to disinheritance and dispossession of widows and orphans. The actual inheritance and succession practices result from a combination of factors. They include the economic and cultural values of the properties and positions in question (and the ways through which they were acquired), the power and authority of the actors, the power relations between different social actors involved in each case, the normative orders referred to and their interpretation and practical implementation, and the institutions involved in the process of decision-making. Overall, people have different understandings of inheritance and succession that furthermore more influence practices. In a local context of legal pluralism, individuals and groups tend to combine different normative orders and practices to claim and secure their rights, or to protect themselves whenever their rights are questioned. Through detailed ethnographic descriptions, the study demonstrates that inheritance and succession are complex processes and depend on economic, social, cultural and political factors at play in specific circumstances.

**Petričević, Igor 2022.** *Beyond Transit: Precarious Emplacement and the Wavering Reception of Migrants in the City of Zagreb.* Research Subject: Social Anthropology. Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University.

The territory of the Republic of Croatia has historically been a place of forced and economic migration, mainly consisting of population movements between former Yugoslav states and other neighbouring European countries. Since the 2000s, these borderlands have become sites of continuous transit migration from the Middle East and Africa. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Zagreb over several periods between 2016 and 2020, this thesis seeks to understand how non-European migration and places of transit in the Balkans interrelate and transform each other. Thus, the study explores how different migrants' trajectories meet, and how they interact with the spaces and people in Zagreb as the country prepares to enter the Schengen area of free movement, and the city is absorbed into the European border regime. The focus on 'migrant' and 'non-migrant' relations in a transit area presents a particular viewpoint on the mediated dynamics of large-scale migration into Europe. The thesis argues for a study of migration and emplacement as entangled with borders, the histories of transit localities, relations within them, affects in everyday encounters, and structures of precarity. As a contribution to the anthropology of transit migration, three interrelated concepts are formulated. First, 'precarious emplacement' captures the complexities of moving and staying on the European periphery by taking these (im)mobilities to be embedded in local spaces, relations and histories. Second, by highlighting the relationality of emplacement, the concept of 'wavering reception' is developed to depict the discourses, practices and orientations of local residents. These fluctuate between hospitality and hostility, and therefore form a complex affective landscape in the urban spaces where migration is prevalent. Third, the thesis develops the concept of 'the Gap' as an indeterminate and ductile space between individuals and groups. It is used as an analytic for exploring the qualitative shifts in position, perceptions and feelings that produce these vacillating relations of proximity and distance which are central to emplacement. This conceptual framework illuminates the changing dynamics of transit migration in Croatia, as well as the various processes and transformations which emerge as (im)mobilities interact with transit areas.

**Rekhis, Mayssa 2022.** *Surviving trauma in exile and the integration-conundrum: navigating therapy and the imperatives of a host(ile?) society.* Research Subject: Health and Social Sciences. Department of Culture and Society, Linköping University.

"Undesirables" of the contemporary world (Agier, 2008), refugees are often considered "Others" whose lives can be wasted, at deadly borders, in detention centers, or at the margins of societies. Proving their suffering is a condition for accessing the right to asylum, but the current migration policies in the host countries expect them to quickly overcome it, and integrate, as a way to pay back for the protection they received. This is partly because some countries offered protection to refugees as an investment to tackle their own challenges of aging societies, and labor shortages, in other words, to reap the so-called "refugee-dividend" (Hansen, 2021). Thus, refugees face what I call an integration-conundrum whereby they are expected to overcome trauma to integrate – as a needed proof of their deservingness of being accepted – while healing is a struggle hardened by the instability due to the difficulties of integration, the structural exclusion, and the impossibility of belonging. Through an

ethnography of a trauma therapy center for refugees in Sweden, this anthropological study explores the experiences of refugees navigating their pain and sufferings, in a context where the focus is on them overcoming trauma and integrating. It closely analyses the consequences of borders, migration, and integration policies on exiles' experiences of suffering, resisting, living, and healing. In parallel, it explores the roles of trauma therapy, trauma discourses, and therapeutic apparatuses in the refugees' journeys, narratives, possibilities for healing, and attempts to lead dignified and fulfilled lives, despite structural exclusion and being "othered". While trauma used to be mobilized to legitimize the victim status and to identify "real refugees" (Fassin & Rechtman, 2007), this study argues that we are now witnessing a trauma regime of survival. And in the particular case of refugees, this survival paradigm gets intertwined with integration and seems to create new hierarchies and categorizations: the good and the bad refugees, the good being the ones able to survive, overcome their trauma, and integrate into their new communities. The bad are the ones who don't recover and continue to be a burden on the welfare states, unable to "integrate". With this categorization, therapeutic spaces take on a new role, one of strengthening the capacities of survival of the "not-yet integrated" refugees, and integration becomes transformed not only into a moral imperative by the host society but also into an individual psychological competency; an equivalent of recovery and survival that refugees need to acquire to prove both their healing and their deservingness.

**Rogat Mauricio 2022.** *Even flows and deferred lives: The logistification of migrant settlement in Sweden.* Research Subject: Social Anthropology. School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg.

In 2016, rebuilt containers and barracks accommodating so-called 'newly arrived immigrants' started to appear in Stockholm, Sweden. People who had been on the move for an extensive time, staying in refugee camps, and transit, reception and asylum centres, found themselves again in a state of deferral, this time within the refuge of the nation-state. This dissertation aims to deepen the understanding of how new thresholds arise and materialise, extending the migration trajectory within the nation-state. To this end, the dissertation attends to conflicting policies, bureaucratic practices and local conditions, focusing primarily on the logic and implementation of the Settlement Act, a Swedish dispersal policy enacted in the wake of the 'summer of migration' in 2015. The new law aimed to speed up the transition of 'newly arrived immigrants' into the labour market by creating 'even flows' between asylum centres and municipal accommodation. More specifically, this dissertation explores how the practices of deferral are enacted in the implementation of the Settlement Act through three separate empirical domains: 1) calculations of the dispersal and matching system at the state level, 2) municipal management and the dwellers' experiences of temporary accommodation and resettlement in Stockholm, and 3) the professional and social dimensions of the encounters between street-level bureaucrats and 'newly arrived immigrants'. The dissertation builds on nine months of ethnographic fieldwork in Stockholm between 2018 and 2019. It comprises participant observations and interviews with officials and with 'newly arrived immigrants' living in temporary housing. The dissertation brings together and analyses the separate empirical domains by drawing on the concept of the logistification of migration. This analytical lens encourages us to dissect the inclusive yet differential mechanisms in the migration apparatus, paying attention to the temporal management of circulation

and mobility, on the one hand, and the ensuing friction and contestation, on the other hand. The dissertation argues that the logistification of migrant settlement management includes several practices that defer the housing shortage to sustain the acceleration from asylum centres to municipal accommodation, which produces a post-asylum threshold and incessant forced mobility. This continuous circulation of people operates as a filtering mechanism between asylum and integration, leading the ‘newly arrived immigrants’ into housing and labour precarity. Hence, the dissertation points to the linkages between the logistical management of settlement, practices of deferral and differential inclusion. This dissertation contributes to the growing literature dealing with the logistification of migration by following state policy through its implementation. While large parts of the literature on the logistification of migration have focused on the state level of managing migration and borders, this dissertation pays attention to how the logistification takes shape within the borders of the nation-state.

## 2023

**Arvidsson, Anna 2023.** *Smallholders and pigs in northern Uganda: an ethnographic study of pig rearing, disease management and local knowledges*. Research Subject: Rural Development. Department of Urban and Rural Development, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences.

In Uganda, pig numbers have increased rapidly in recent decades, with the majority reared by smallholder farmers in rural areas. It has been suggested that pig production can play an important role in reducing rural poverty. However, the severe and often fatal disease of African swine fever (ASF) represents a major threat to the Ugandan pig sector, hampering its potential to mitigate poverty. This thesis work is situated in post-conflict northern Uganda and aims to contribute knowledge about the challenges that smallholders face in pig production, paying particular attention to ASF. A discourse analysis of policy documents informing the Ugandan veterinary and agriculture sector was combined with ethnographic fieldwork among smallholders in northern Uganda. Results show that pig diseases such as ASF are one of many challenges faced by smallholders who keep pigs. Besides the obstacle of pig diseases and the associated difficulties commonly experienced, smallholders described social tensions caused by the possibility of accumulating individual wealth through pig production. The findings also reveal that smallholders have very limited access to veterinary services and are therefore heavily dependent on the resources and knowledge available in their local communities when dealing with pig diseases. In contrast to the dominant development narrative found in agricultural policies, which focus on transforming smallholder farming into large-scale agriculture, smallholders often perceive their own pig production as a potential launch pad out of poverty, rather than as a means to become large-scale farmers. Despite all the challenges associated with pig rearing, most smallholders continue to invest in pigs in the hope of improving their everyday lives and their future.

**Caballero, Adelaida 2023.** *Shortchanged: Elderly Women Street Vendors in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea*. Research Subject: Cultural Anthropology. Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University.

Normative assumptions regarding reciprocity between adult children and elderly parents continue to dominate narratives on later life in sub-Saharan Africa. Yet strenuous

socioeconomic conditions make it difficult for families to meet expectations of care and support. In Malabo, elderly women commonly engage in economic activities such as street vending for survival. Separation from male partners and high unemployment among men and youths often turn senior women into sole providers in multi-generational households. The cultural script of self-sacrificial motherhood, however, leads people to believe that these senior women are hardly entitled to demand reciprocal support – that as proper mothers and grandmothers, they are merely fulfilling a duty. Gender-based forms of exploitation and feelings of desertion characterize family life for many older Equatoguinean women.

Elderly women street vendors who live and work in Malabo are also mistreated outside their homes. Harassment, humiliation, and physical invisibilization are some of the means by which ‘patriotic citizens’ and representatives of state authorities protect the government’s narrative of ‘unprecedented development.’

The thesis explores how elderly women street vendors try to counter the routinized types of violence to which they are exposed and how they strive to assert themselves as persons. I approach the women’s articulations of personhood through the concept of moral economy and discuss them with regard to normative African relationality. The empirical basis of the work is fourteen months of uninterrupted ethnographic field research in Malabo between 2017 and 2018. The analyses rely on social gerontological theories on dependency, intergenerational tensions, prosocial behaviors, gender identity, sexuality, and autonomy, as well as on anthropological theories on the category of the person, everyday violence, morality, gossip, and older women’s sexuality in Africa. The thesis aims to contribute to humanistic gerontological literature by highlighting the meanings that autonomy can take for seniors who live in conditions of no institutional support, normalized violence at home, gender prejudice, and the kind of ageism that arises from narratives that equate social advancement with development, hence identifying old age with anti-values such as ignorance and backwardness. Findings suggest that, among elderly women street vendors in Malabo, striving toward a sense of autonomous personhood is not only a means for coping with the challenges of aging in a difficult socioeconomic milieu, but also a more encompassing rejection of ‘retraditionalized’ national politics and authoritarianism.

**Engblom, Rikard 2023.** *Time Warps: Refugees and the Experience of Waiting in Rural Sweden*. Research Subject: Ethnology. Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University.

This thesis explores the ways in which refugees’ experience of time is warped when they come to Sweden. It is based on fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Avesta, a small municipality in rural Sweden.

Refugee reception and immigration control in Sweden is characterized by humanitarian ideals that exist in tension with practices and policies aiming to restrict immigration in the name of security and stability. Each chapter of this thesis documents a different combination of these ideals and concerns, examining how they generate particular configurations of waiting. For many refugees in Sweden, everyday life is characterized by waiting—waiting to have their asylum application processed; to receive a residence permit, which grants them the right to work; to be reunited with their families to find a place in Swedish society. This process often takes several years, during which the conditions for receiving residence permit may suddenly change or be made more difficult.



The thesis is a contribution to the recent “temporal turn” in migration studies through its focus on waiting as a productive phenomenon in vulnerable circumstances. The increased presence of refugees has given rise to anti-immigrant sentiments in Sweden, but it has also generated welcoming, compassionate responses. By addressing not only how refugees cope with living in a continual state of waiting under precarious conditions, but also how bureaucracies, civil societies, and individuals respond to this waiting, the thesis discusses the sociological and ethical implications of refugees’ waiting. *Time Warps* demonstrates the importance of unpacking combinations of humanitarianism and securitarianism when developing a deepened understanding of refugees experience of waiting in rural Sweden.

**Landström, Katarina 2023.** *The Specter of Community: An Ethnographic Exploration of the Local Support for the Kaunisvaara Mine*. Research Subject: Rural Development. Department of Urban and Rural Development, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences.

This dissertation explores the reasons behind local support for the opening of an iron ore mine in the village Kaunisvaara, Pajala municipality, Sweden. The thesis makes a contribution to knowledge by deepening our understanding of mining conflicts in Sweden’s rural north in the twenty-first century. It seeks to answer the following question: What hopes, dreams and expectations do Pajala’s mining proponents wish that the opening of the Kaunisvaara mine will realize?

In contemporary research, mining conflicts are grasped as the result of conflicting values between mining proponents and mining opponents. Previous research links opposition to mining with valuation of a clean environment, local culture and livelihoods. Meanwhile, local support for mining is linked to a valuation of local economic and demographic growth. However, the notion of value employed in much research is insensitive to the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental values. This has left the values or ends of mining proponents, who see money and development as means to something else, unexplored.

Although value is acknowledged as being central to mining conflicts, previous research on mining conflicts rarely unpacks the notion of value in detail. By taking a more precisely defined notion of value as its starting point, this thesis offers a deeper understanding of the hopes, dreams and expectations underlying the explicitly stated economic rationales advanced in support for a mine. Empirically, the dissertation adds to the literature on mining conflicts through an ethnographic account of support, rather than resistance, to local mining operations. Theoretically, it offers a starting point for rethinking mining conflicts, and other natural resource conflicts, not primarily as the product of actual, clashing values between different local groups, but as struggles over the very definition of value. In that struggle, the main line of conflict runs not between members of the local community, but between local communities and actors driven by profit maximization.

**Rodneliusen, Rasmus 2023.** *Underwater Worlds: An Ethnography of Waste, Pollution, and Marine Life*. Research Subject: Social Anthropology. Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University.

In this dissertation, I investigate relations between humans, waste, pollution, and marine life. I introduce the concept of Aquabiopolitics as a means to understand how humans govern life in water in order to enrich human life on land. The study focuses on the Baltic Sea and Lake Mälaren, using Stockholm, the capital of Sweden, as the connection

point. Throughout the dissertation, I explore how human practices over time have had devastating effects on marine life and continue to have so today.

The dissertation engages with the marine world through underwater ethnography to provide a perspective on water from below the surface. In this endeavor, I employ the assistance of marine scientists and trash scuba divers who are jointly invested in tracking human maltreatment of water and finding solutions for treating water differently in the future. We will follow the scientists on expeditions at sea and to their laboratories in order to learn about their methods and relations to underwater worlds. Together with the trash scuba divers, we will dive into the dark murky waters around Stockholm—experiencing what it is like to move below water, among sharp and toxic waste, without any visibility.

The work of creating a knowing and caring relationship between humans and water is of key importance to both scientists and divers. Therefore, one of the main parts of this dissertation is to analyze how, and if, this relationship can be created: via social media, images, installations, or other means. For as the divers often say: *Water is Life. Make it Important!*

## 2024

**Butungo, Stanslaus Peter 2024.** *Access To Land in the Context of HIV and AIDS in Lyamba Ward, Rural Tanzania : A Case of Lyambamgongo Ward in Bukombe District.* Research Subject: Rural Development. Department of Urban and Rural Development, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences.

Access to land is an important contributor to the wellbeing and social status of people in rural areas. However, this is often compromised for people affected with HIV/AIDS, a disease which is prevalent in Tanzania. Prior to this study, others have tried to associate between HIV/AIDS infection and land access. However, the link and the contextual factors underpinning such relationship are largely not well understood. This research explores: first, how and in which ways HIV infection affects access to land; second, what contextual factors underpin the impacts of HIV on land access, and thirdly, who among HIV-affected people is more vulnerable to loss of access to land. Drawing on theoretical accounts that frame land access as a question of social power, this study undertakes intensive ethnographic research in Lyamba ward in Bukombe District, Tanzania. The research draws from the life history accounts of 17 HIV-infected people and their access to land. The study reveals a variety of ways in which HIV/AIDS negatively affects land access: destabilising social relationships, spousal or parental deaths, and diminished social status. Such cases happen in contexts characterised by existing land contestations, unequal social relationships, and a pluralistic legal system of overlapping formal and informal rules, norms and values that govern land access. While women and children are often at risk of loss, men with weaker land claims can also lose access. However, the study also documents instances where vulnerable people can fight back to secure land access through collective mobilisation, knowledge on legal land rights, and relations with authority figures. While loss of land can further exacerbate experiences of marginalisation, successful attempts to secure land access can validate personal worth and protect social esteem. The study calls attention to the contested nature of land and how changing dimensions of social power are central to shaping land access in the context of HIV/AIDS.

**Gota, Pascal 2024.** *Heritage Forests in Inhambane: Negotiating History, Landscape and Environment*. Research Subject: Archaeology, Cultural Studies, Botany, Environmental Sciences, Human Geography, Social Anthropology. Department of Archaeology and Ancient History.

Heritage forests are gaining greater prominence and importance as places with high cultural and ecological value, and ideal for biodiversity conservation worldwide. However, there are few studies documenting these forests in Mozambique. This thesis presents 88 different cultural heritage sites in Inhambane Province, of which 52 are heritage forests. In this thesis I focus on three case study areas, Luido, Chitanga, and Mapoka showing with satellite images analyses that forest boundaries have remained relatively stable over the last three decades. Heritage forests are connected to discourse and discursive practices of heritage. Chiefs are the main representatives of the local institutions and its associated social codes and system of laws for protection of heritage forests. In post-colonial Mozambique, such local heritage practices were constrained and controlled, however, they were still maintained. Botanical inventories of the forests show that local heritage practices taking place in and around have a fundamental role to the existence of plant diversity. A total of 14 plant species with great conservation value was identified. Most of these locally protected heritage sites are not included in formally protected areas, and they are currently experiencing various types of pressures from within and outside the community, mostly from logging activities. Formal recognition of communities as collaborators and partners to the continuity of these areas is essential and feasible, but such need to be implemented cautiously and driven by communities. There are legal mechanisms at the national and international levels, in culture and biodiversity conservation, to secure these types of heritage sites and conservation areas in Inhambane, Mozambique, and beyond.

**Lindberg, Emy 2024.** *Dream Machine: an Ethnography of Football Migration between Ghana and Sweden*. Research Subject: Cultural Anthropology. Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University.

This thesis examines football migration between Ghana and Sweden. Based on multi-sited, transnational, part-time ethnographic fieldwork that spanned 22 months between 2017 and 2019, it focuses on the everyday realities of Ghanaian football migrants throughout their labor migration trajectory. At the same time, the thesis contextualizes these experiences within the larger historical processes of neoliberalism, colonialism, and the transatlantic slave trade. The theoretical framework draws on literature concerning dreams and aspirations, time and migration, family structures, race, and the enduring impact of colonialism.

The thesis sheds light on the historical connection between Ghanaian and Swedish football as a colonial project, a national project, and a global postcolonial phenomenon, emphasizing the political economy of football migration. By zooming in on dreams and the footballing body, it then examines footballers as neoliberal entrepreneurs of themselves as well as objects of the industry's racialized dreams. Next, the thesis draws attention to the temporal aspects of football migration, including institutional borders, capitalist timelines, and the time of the footballing body. The thesis goes on to explore family structures, particularly fatherhood, in the migratory and footballing context, showing how these structures are interconnected with the business interests of the global football industry. It further demonstrates how race and racialization are present in the Swedish footballing

context and finally looks at return migration, investigating how migrant footballers seek to repay economic and social debts.

As performers on a commercialized global stage, the footballers embody the dreams of people all over the world. They are commodified and seen as investments for the future, both by people at home and by those working in the industry. Their success generates profit and shows that the dream of migration and the dream of football can come true. This thesis uses the metaphor of the dream machine to understand how dreams operate both globally and locally. It examines the linkages between maintenance of the footballing body, transactions of care, practices of social inclusion and racialized exclusion, and the functioning of the global capitalist football industry. Doing so, it emphasizes the meaningfulness of the migration trajectory for individual footballers and their networks, placing these relationships at the very heart of the beautiful game.

**Linder, Elin 2024.** *Caring for Olive Oil: Cultivating Flows, Crafts & Traditions*. Research Subject: Social Anthropology. Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University.

Olive oil is a food, but more than that, it is a social relation, cultural phenomenon, local practice, global industry, emplaced tradition, valued concern, cyclical rhythm, embodied care-work, multigenerational flow, kindred ecology, and cultivated craft. This is the case in the region of Puglia, the heel of Italy, where over half a million ancient olive trees and an entire landscape of olive groves bear witness to its heritage of making. This thesis builds on more than one and a half years of ethnographic fieldwork with Pugliese oliviculturalists. It uses sensory and multimodal methods for collecting and representing material, and takes creative ethnography as its frame for critical analysis. Through the concepts of *flow* and *artful care*, it advances the spatiotemporal dynamics of the making of Pugliese olive oil. It frames the work of research participants as *situated craft* and brings attention to embodied features of knowing and doing. It curiously explores how olive oil occurs practiced and lived from the perspective of practitioners, thus making the bodies and work of beyond-human agencies into account, making claims to the broad-scope ecology of life inherent in *olivicultura* (olive culture). A major finding is that Pugliese oliviculturalists *live landscape* and work in rhythm with the atmospheric dynamics influencing it. Another is that traditions flow together with modern developments, growing local practices of craftsmanship while creating commodities in line with global market structures. The concepts of *care* and *value* are fundamental to the thesis. They are paramount to the lived (hi)stories of Pugliese oliviculturalists, hence to the narrations and analyses of this thesis.

**Shen, Qing 2024.** *Queer Fun in Shanghai: The Social Lives of Elderly Working-Class Chinese Men*. Research Subject: Cultural Anthropology. Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University.

This thesis uses “play” as a core concept to examine the lives and subjectivities of older working-class queer men (mostly above 60 years old) in Shanghai. Play (玩 *wan* in Chinese) is a distinctive feature of the everyday lives of the men, who spend a great deal of time with fellow queers engaged in a variety of leisure activities, such as hanging out in parks, eating together at home or restaurants, singing karaoke, and joining sight-seeing tours. Drawing on anthropologist Gregory Bateson’s theory of play as a kind of metacommunication that creates a play frame and a boundary between play and non-play, I examine how the play

frame continually invoked by the men (“just for fun” or “just play”) is materialized, enacted, and transgressed.

Based on fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Shanghai conducted between 2021 and 2022, this thesis demonstrates that queerness is centrally linked to playfulness. Playing is a process of queering through which the men actively explore alternative and ludic ways of being without any real consequences for their day-to-day lives, in which most of them are married to women. But “play” as playfulness or “just for fun” also constrains the men’s perceptions of queer identities, their relationships, and their friendships with one another.

A main argument is that unless we acknowledge the existence and perspectives of people like the men I describe in this thesis, our knowledge of queer lives will remain biased and impoverished. The old men I write about here in many ways are the opposite of the identity-based sexual rights activists who attract so much attention in the scholarly and popular literature (and who write much of that literature). The men are not oppositional, they are not activists, and they have little interest in gay rights or any kinds of sexual rights. The men’s lives reveal a form of jovial queer existence in a repressive non-Western setting. They complicate understandings about topics of importance in anthropology, such as sexual identity, aging, resistance, and vulnerability. Play is a lens that makes it difficult to view people’s actions only as either disruptions of power or enactments of power. Play highlights enjoyment, fun, and pleasure in ways that make them available to critical analysis. Play is what literary scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003:149) has called a “reparative practice”; one that “confers plenitude” on people and recognizes the complexities and surprises of their lives.

**Stiernström, Arvid 2024.** *Beyond the Minefield : Mining, Development, and Open Moments in Northern Sweden.* Research Subject: Rural Development. Department of Urban and Rural Development, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences.

In recent years mining has taken centre stage in rural development. In part, this is a consequence of the ‘green transition’, where the demand for minerals to develop new energy systems is increasing dramatically. Using ethnographic methods, I take my starting point in Storuman, a sparsely populated municipality in the rural North of Sweden where three potential mines are already reterritorialising property rights and access, and the governance of land is being reconfigured. With the aim to explore how extractive interventions shape rural places in times of transition, I ask questions about the entanglements between people and land, the reconfigurations of territory, and what large scale extractive interventions mean for the conceptualisation of rural development in Sweden and beyond.

To understand how the ‘green transition’ impacts rural areas and what the future for rural development entails, I bring together research on resource extraction, rural development, and indigeneity. By doing so, I show how the potential mines are generating open moments, where a state of uncertainty becomes a central part of life. I uncover how rather than being passive receivers of state policies, people take charge of their situation in open moments to steer the outcome of events. I argue that there is an overarching critique of how state policies and practices treat communities at the edge of the state. The core of this critique lies at the intersection of past and future, as people make sense of what unfolds in the open moment both as the latest instantiation of repression in a long history of colonial practices, and as a desire to reevaluate what development is and can be.

**Östergren, Petra 2024.** *Sweden's ban on sex-purchase. Morality politics and the governance of prostitution.* Research Subject: Social Anthropology. Department of Sociology, Lund University.

This essay thesis examines Sweden's 1999 ban on purchasing sexual services, considering the attention it received as an unprecedented approach to governing prostitution, the highly polarised political environment in which it exists, and the multiple legal contradictions it displays. Using material gathered through a multisited method from 2009 through 2019, the study shows that the offence is a variant of other anti-prostitution laws directed at sex workers and their clients. Moreover, the thesis argues that the highly charged emotions surrounding the ban, as well as its conflicts and contradictions, are comprehensible if analysed within the framework of morality politics.

The thesis contributes empirically to studies of prostitution policy, theoretically to the conception of morality politics, and methodologically to the anthropological analysis of law and policy. It proposes an empirically grounded typology of prostitution policies: the repressive, aimed at eliminating the sex industry through punitive measures; the restrictive, permitting the trade to operate under strict conditions, regulated by both criminal and civil law; and the integrative, which does not criminalise consensual sex work but regulates the industry and protects sex workers through sector-specific labour and trade legislation. Its major theoretical contribution is a refinement of the concept of morality politics that offers new insights into how issues such as prostitution, homosexuality, abortion, and drug use are perceived, discussed, and governed in liberal democracies. These all involve 'consensual crimes' rooted in religious notions of sin and regarded as posing a risk to social order. They are typically addressed by the three distinct policy models, while the governance agenda either seeks to reform those who engage in these marginalised practices or to grant them equal civil rights. Empirically, the thesis demonstrates that the ambivalent legal and civic status of sex workers in Sweden is based on an exclusionary logic inherent in all anti-prostitution law, suggesting a link to the historically subordinate position of women's work, as well as to the discriminatory treatment of 'sinners' and other social outliers.

These conclusions are the result of following the sex-purchase ban over a long time and across four related socio-legal domains: established law, political discourse, implementation, and impact, including a close scrutiny of how the ban relates to general legal principles and rules according to the source of law. The thesis consists of six introductory and summary chapters, two published articles, and two essays that have not yet been published.