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Critical Empiricism for an Urgent Time

There has been, if you’ll excuse the analogy, a veritable tsunami of writing that seeks to bring nonhuman agency to the fore in social science and humanities scholarship. Writing in human-animal studies, political ecology, environmental history, vegetal and animal geographies, and science and technology studies all, to greater and lesser extents, claim this terrain, offering complex engagements with the range of actors—human and nonhuman—that make up our shared worlds. And so, the question I held in my mind as I approached this book was the following: what fresh insights might be gleaned from an anthropological lens on Anthropocene futures? It turns out that Rubber Boots Methods for the Anthropocene represents an important intervention that in many cases fills the gaps in each of these cognate fields.

Of course, anthropology has long been at the forefront of this kind of careful multispecies work, so it should likely come as no surprise that each of the chapters welcomes the reader into their respective more-than-human communities in thoughtful and compelling ways. However, where the book really shines—and offers something new—is in its ethical and political imperative to develop novel methodologies to understand our current moment. While conceptual critiques of the Anthropocene as a descriptor abound, Nils Bubandt, Astrid Oberborbeck Anderson, and Rachel Cypher suggest that it offers a “fundamental provocation” to understand living in the past and present as “a multispecies phenomenon” (p. 3). From this starting point, the contributors to this edited volume offer different modes to engage with the histories and effects of the Anthropocene in a range of different places.

Rubber Boots Methods emerged from the transdisciplinary experimentation of Aarhus University Research on the Anthropocene, headed by anthropologist Anna Tsing. The research center seeks to “cut across the conventional divide between the human sciences and the life sci-
ences,” something that is “required to consider these Anthropocene dilemmas.”[1] These conceptual and methodological attachments are clearly set out in the introduction and again in the afterword, offering both the inspiration for and aspirations of this kind of work. These bookends offer a larger argument about how different disciplinary affordances can (and in some cases cannot) be enmeshed into a methodological approach that considers the whole of Anthropocene life. Calling for placed-based or “patchy” investigations, the introduction and afterword suggest that an analysis of multispecies life must draw on methods from ecology, history, biology, anthropology—and beyond—that emphasize the partiality of knowledge, uncertainty, and openness in the research process (p. 19).

The body of the edited volume is divided into three sections with thirteen chapters. Part 1, “Critical Description,” has four chapters that unpack socio-ecological histories of landscapes that include chestnut trees in Italy, dwarf shrubs in Lesotho, tracking in the Kalahari Desert, and farmer suicides in India. Part 2 offers four chapters that invite and demonstrate curiosity about a wide variety of multispecies landscapes and practices, including prescribed burns in Australia, snorkeling in West Papau, the experience of monsoons in India, and cattle ranching in Argentina. While it was sometimes difficult to parse substantive differences between the approaches in parts 1 and 2, each chapter offers a compelling case study on its own terms. Part 3 explores how collaboration can work across disciplinary divides. The five chapters in this section demonstrate that collaboration is fruitful but always hard won; sometimes we begin from such different starting points that partnership, when it is possible, takes time, humility, and patience.

Each chapter in Rubber Boots Methods draws inspiration from and mobilizes Tsing’s call to engage in different iterations of the “arts of noticing”: moving across microbes to capitalist colonialism to examine multispecies life through fieldwork.[2] A range of methods are employed to understand the more-than-human histories that have led to our contemporary Anthropocene moment; walking, drawing, map making, oral histories, interviews, participant observation, archival research, horse riding, carbon modeling, tax records, and tracking all make an appearance, crossing and recombining disciplinary approaches. Each contributor has spent many years in their research sites, becoming attuned to the places they describe, which comes through in the depth of analysis across the chapters. Their experimental and imaginative use of methods opens up spaces of creative possibility for those who understand the places as multispecies assemblages but are not always sure how to access that methodologically. In some cases beautifully written, and in all cases generative, the chapters of this edited volume invite us to think new thoughts about how research can be undertaken that responds to the urgency of social and environmental justice and, indeed, the inseparability of the two.

Rubber Boots Methods is not a methods textbook. It does not tell us the right way to examine Anthropocene entanglements. Instead, it is an appeal to do the work of what Tsing, in the afterword, names “critical empiricism,” “a form of empirical inquiry in which critical reflection remains central to the process of formulating research objects—at the heart of collaboration—as well as the research and analysis that follow” (p. 389). In this way, it is a book about the stakes of the Anthropocene and the importance of attending to all the humans and nonhumans that shape and are shaped by socio-ecological change. It offers finely rendered examples from which to draw inspiration, but no prescriptions. The lesson is that each “patch” will require its own inimitable transdisciplinary, methodological approach. Each chapter invites the reader to think across temporalities, scales, and materialities to understand, at least partially, how places are made and remade by more-than-human collaborations. Rich in historic-
al analysis, methodological innovation, and encouragement to do more careful, attentive, and ethical work, this book will be of keen interest to those working on multispecies relations across a range of fields.

Notes


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