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The Multispecies Speaker Series and an experimental
ethnography with the volcano Tajogaite
On more-than-human anthropology : Methodological
reflections on multispecies ethnography

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Zusammenfassung

Diese Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit der Ontologie, Epistemologie und Methodologie der Multispezies-Ethnographie. Ausgehend von den Annahmen einer kritisch realistischen Ontologie, einer konstruktivistischen und enaktivistischen Epistemologie sowie einer auf Sinneserfahrungen basierenden Methodologie der Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie untersuche ich, wie die Vortragenden und Teilnehmenden der *Multispecies Speaker Series* die Multispezies-Ethnographie in ihren jeweiligen Forschungsprozessen umsetzen. Basierend auf den wichtigsten Erkenntnissen dieser Vorträge und halbstrukturierten Interviews mit einigen der Teilnehmenden führte ich eine experimentelle Ethnographie mit dem Vulkan Tajogaite auf La Palma durch. Die charakteristischen Merkmale der Multispezies-Ethnographie sind ein erweiterter Fokus auf “more-than-human” Entitäten im Feld durch ein gesteigertes Bewusstsein für multisensorische Eindrücke, eine außerordentliche Bereitschaft, verschiedene Denkweisen und analytische Rahmen aus dem Feld als Forschende vollständig zu übernehmen, und die Einbeziehung möglichst vieler unterschiedlicher Perspektiven auf nicht-menschliche Teilnehmende im Feld in die ethnographische Beschreibung. Nicht-menschliche Wesen können durch imaginäres und experimentelles Schreiben in die ethnographische Beschreibung miteinbezogen werden. Es ist jedoch entscheidend anzuerkennen, dass alle etwaigen in der Ethnographie enthaltenen Perspektiven auf solche nicht-menschlichen Teilnehmenden im Feld inhärent anthropozentrisch sind. Daher bietet die Multispezies-Ethnographie eine herausragende Perspektive für die Anthropologie der Epistemologien.

Abstract

This thesis explores the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of multispecies ethnography. Starting from the assumptions of a critical realist ontology, a constructivist and enactivist epistemology, and a sensory-based methodology of social and cultural anthropology, I examine how the speakers of the Multispecies Speaker Series approach multispecies ethnography in their research processes. Based on the key insights of these talks and of semi-structured interviews with some of the participants, I conducted an experimental more-than-human ethnography with the volcano Tajogaite on La Palma. The distinguishing features of multispecies ethnography are a broadened focus on more-than-human beings in the field through a heightened awareness of multi-sensory impressions, an outstanding willingness to fully adopt different analytical frameworks from the field, and to include as many different perspectives as possible into the ethnographic writing on a more-than-human being. More-than-human beings can be included in ethnographic writing through imaginary and experimental writing. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that any perspectives on more-than-human beings included in ethnography remain inherently anthropocentric. Therefore, multispecies ethnography offers an outstanding perspective for the anthropology of epistemologies.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the “animal turn” (White & Candeia, 2018; URL#2) has been linked to “multispecies ethnography” in anthropology, and the publication of articles like *The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography* (2010) by S. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich or *Animals, Plants, Peoples and Things* (2013) by Laura A. Ogden et alia, the term “multispecies ethnography” has been widely discussed in anthropology, particularly in the fields of political ecology, and environmental, urban and medical anthropology. The expanded research methodology and writing approach aspire to surpass the limitations of the human-animal dichotomy inherent in Western thought, and to acknowledge the interconnectedness and inseparability of humans and other beings. In the wake of multiple global crises, this method comes with the exciting promise of understanding those connections better than ever before. Unlike earlier approaches to including the non-human in ethnographic research, multispecies investigations highlight the agency and knowledge making of more-than-human beings. Whether they are plants (Chao, 2022a; Chao, 2022b), animals (Haraway, 2008), fungi (Tsing, 2015; cit. in White & Candeia, 2018), insects (Raffles, 2010; ibid.), microbes (Paxson, 2008, ibid.), or spirits (Taneja, 2022a), multispecies research aspires to embrace them “as persons” (Knight, 2005:1; cit.in White & Candeia) in their ethnographies and theories. This new interdisciplinary approach to ethnography challenges the anthropocentric perspective of anthropological research and seeks to broaden the understanding of other-than-human beings by including different ways of thinking into ethnography. However, these aspirations come with a set of challenges and risky endeavors – from the risk of essentializing, idealizing, and appropriating “indigenous” knowledge, to the challenge of undertheorizing interdisciplinarity, disagreeing on methodologies, translating between and beyond ontologies, disregarding human inequalities, and ignoring the limits of human-and-more-than-human knowledge making.

The excitement about a possible new, more inclusive way of doing ethnography, together with a certain scepticism regarding its actual prospects in the face of those challenges, has led me to choose this fascinating topic as the focus of this thesis. The driving questions behind this research project evolved out of my previous interest in the epistemology of social and cultural anthropology, which I pursued in the course of my theoretical Bachelor’s thesis *Reflexionen zur kultur- und sozialanthropologischen Epistemologie* (Poer, 2020). To satisfy my curiosity on anthropological knowledge making and knowledge validation processes, I found it relevant to ask basic questions of the consistency of reality, the possibilities of getting to know that

reality, the peculiarities of doing so through an anthropological lens, what it means to know and how anthropologists define and validate knowledge. As I elaborate in the first part of this thesis, starting from the assumption of a subject-independent, experiential, and tangible reality, I understand “knowledge” as a social phenomenon embodied and situated within individuals. Accordingly, I understand anthropological knowledge making as deeply based on human-human interaction, the sensory experience of the field through the ethnographer’s senses, the prelingual and verbal exchange with research participants, and the engagement with anthropological theory making. However, when it comes to “more-than-human” participants, how can these interactions and conditions present itself? What is there to know (ontology) when “more-than-human” participants ought to be included in anthropological research? How can we get to know it (epistemology), and which methods would be most suitable to do so and why (methodology)?

To obtain answers to my questions about the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of “multispecies ethnography”, I conducted semi-structured online interviews with scholars and PhD students who were applying this approach – Sophie Chao, Anand Vivek Taneja, Noha Fikry, and Bradley Dunseith. I participated in the “Multispecies Speaker Series”, a series of talks organized by the Ethnography Lab of the University of Toronto, where Sophie Chao, Kim TallBear, Anand Vivek Taneja, and Kajri Jain presented and discussed their past, current, and future research projects in the context of multispecies ethnography. Together with the PhD students Noha Fikry, Bradley Dunseith, and Ridhima Sharma, these scholars had a wide understanding of “multispecies”, focussing not only on “species” – plants, animals or other living organisms, but also on the unseen and the invisible, the supernatural and the spiritual, as well as on fake animals and landscapes. In the second part of this thesis, I depict my insights on the practice of multispecies ethnography gained from these talks and interviews, and reflect on possible preliminary answers to my initial research questions stemming from a curiosity for the philosophy of science.

Inspired by these newly gained insights, which added a new depth to my understanding of anthropological knowledge making, I was intrigued to put my understanding of the workings of multispecies ethnography into practice. Hence, I decided to test multispecies ethnography in the form of an experimental ethnography that explored the possibility of including a landscape – the volcano “Tajogaite” on the Canary Island of La Palma – as a “person” in an anthropological research project. The third part of this thesis leads you through this ethnographic experience with the Tajogaite on La Palma, and in particular with the volcano

guards, tourists, and people affected by the devastating eruption. After initial doubts and ethical considerations, I found a way to ethically engage with people related to the volcano, and gained valuable insights on the possibilities, advantages, and limitations of multispecies ethnography.

Overall, I came to reach a broader understanding of multispecies ethnography by engaging in theoretical reflections, interviewing scholars who applied this method, listening to the talks of the Multispecies Speaker Series, and by trying it out myself. To depict this understanding of multispecies ethnography, it is relevant to first dive into the theoretical basis of my reflections on knowledge and reality stemming from the philosophy of science, as well as on the peculiarities of anthropological knowledge making.

PART I – THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

To understand the formation and nature of multispecies ethnography as a way of anthropological knowledge making, it is essential to first establish a foundational definition of reality and knowledge (cf. Wintersteller 2012: 6). This necessitates contemplating the constitution of reality and the ways in which this reality can be apprehended. Christina Toren and João de Pina-Cabral emphasize in *The Challenge of Epistemology* (Toren & Pina-Cabral 2011: 2; cit. in Pober, 2020: 6) the importance of exploring epistemologies in anthropology, which refers to understanding what it means to know and how knowledge is created. Similarly, they propose the exploration of different ontologies, which concerns what there is to know or what exists. They highlight that processes of knowledge generation have been relatively underexplored within anthropology, and that there are few ethnographies specifically dedicated to this topic (Toren & Pina-Cabral 2011: 3). However, a reflection on the study of the “Other” on an epistemological basis involves acknowledging that certain data cannot be collected because anthropology lacks adequate concepts to describe that data (Holbraad 2011: 8, cit. in Pober 2020: 6). Therefore, it is particularly relevant for anthropology to explore all kinds of ontologies and epistemologies. According to Toren, epistemologies and ontologies need to be considered in relation to each other, as they mutually imply one another and are best understood as figure-ground relationships (Toren & Pina-Cabral 2011: 4; cit. in Pober, 2020: 6). However, Martin Holbraad contradicts this approach by advocating for a clear separation of epistemology and ontology and an anthropological reflection solely focused on the *modus operandi* of anthropology at the ontological level (Holbraad 2011: 81f). While it is possible and important to examine multispecies ethnography through many different viewpoints, I opted to delve into the philosophy of science to form basic theoretical assumptions on the mechanisms of knowledge validation within social science. Before diving into the peculiarities of multispecies ethnography, I depict this theoretical basis on ontology, epistemology, knowledge, and anthropological knowledge making.

1 ONTOLOGIES, EPISTEMOLOGIES, AND DEFINITIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

This section delves into several definitions of ontology, epistemology, and knowledge relevant to the analysis of multispecies ethnography. Following my elaboration of the epistemology of social and cultural anthropology in *Reflexionen zur kultur- und sozialanthropologischen Epistemologie* (Pober 2020), this chapter is divided into sections on “ontologies”, “epistemologies” and “definitions of knowledge”. However, it is crucial to recognize that each definition of knowledge inherently implies its own epistemology and ontology, underscoring the importance of considering them in relation to one another. After exploring relevant ontological positions, I depict different epistemological currents that emerge from these diverse ontologies. The subsequent section presents several definitions of knowledge from anthropological, philosophical, and cognitive science perspectives (cf. Pober, 2020: 6ff).

1.1 ONTOLOGIES

Ontology, is a branch of philosophy, which investigates the fundamental structures of reality. In the context of social and cultural anthropology, it is important to establish what is meant by “reality” as a prerequisite for understanding and pursuing knowledge (Wintersteller 2012: 6, cit. in Pober 2020: 7). Different approaches to defining reality assume a singular “reality” vs. multiple “realities” contingent upon consciousness: Some argue that there is a singular objective reality that exists independently of our consciousness. Others propose that reality is subjective and varies depending on individual consciousness, suggesting that each individual has their own subjective reality. The approach to “reality” as constituted by discourses denies the existence of a pre-discursive reality. Instead, it posits that reality is constructed through discourses, language, and social interactions only (ibid.). Following, I discuss the relevance of positions stemming from those different approaches to reality – namely critical realism as an example for a position of “one reality”, and relativism and universalism as examples for “multiple realities”.

1.1.1 CRITICAL REALISM

The ontological perspective of critical realism is particularly relevant for the analysis of the epistemology of social and cultural anthropology in general, and offers a useful framework for understanding multispecies ethnography in particular. It stands in contrast to solipsistic

perspectives, which argue that there is no reality independent of the subject and that reality is entirely constructed within the subject. However, proponents of critical realism believe that there is such a subject-independent reality, even though it can never be fully apprehended by our individual senses. Pina-Cabral (Toren & Pina-Cabral 2011: 13, cit. in Pober, 2020: 8) emphasizes the scientific relevance of a realistic perspective and criticizes solipsistic approaches. According to Pina-Cabral, the impossibility of making statements about reality from a solipsistic position undermines the generation of knowledge about the world. This position asserts that there are as many realities as there are individuals, leading to a complete relativism in any discussion about reality. In his call for a “New Realism” (Gingrich 2009: 181f, cit. in Pober 2020: 8), André Gingrich highlights the importance of focussing on scientific evidence and the validation of anthropological theories. He clarifies that this realistic approach should not be understood as revitalization of post-positivist perspectives or a return to objectivist paradigms. Instead, *“new realism introduces a maximum of qualitative research and of self-awareness about the power of social and ideological constructions and representations into the research process itself, as much as into the interpretation of results”* (Gingrich 2009: 183). When it comes to assessing an ethnographic method that aims to include various “species” into anthropological research, a critical perspective on reality as subject-independent (and species-independent), together with a heightened self-awareness about the influence of sensory, emotional, social and ideological constructions into the research process, present a valuable ontological basis for the understanding of multispecies ethnography.

1.1.2 RELATIVISM

Relativistic perspectives on reality posit that different socially constructed realities exist and reject the notion of an overarching truth. Instead, they argue that statements about reality are always relative to their social contexts and linguistic and symbolic frameworks. According to this view, truth is contingent upon the specific context in which it is constructed. While this allows for negotiations and discussions about statements regarding reality, it also carries the risk of exempting truth claims from evaluation due to their perceived relativity (Wintersteller 2012: 20; cit. in Pober, 2020: 9). Pina-Cabral emphasizes that while methodological relativity is acceptable, it should never lead to ontological relativism, as the latter is both ethically problematic and scientifically disadvantageous (Toren & Pina-Cabral, 2011: 13; cit. in Pober, 2020: 8). Solipsistic notions of reality and their implied relativism can make it difficult to generate verifiable statements about reality. While departing from a relativist ontological

position could be problematic, methodological and epistemological relativism can be fruitful for understanding multispecies ethnography – a method that engages with different ways of perceiving and knowing.

1.1.3 UNIVERSALISM

From a universalist perspective, proponents aim to trace diverse statements about the nature of reality back to a single, comprehensive principle. André Gingrich argues that a universalist stance is more relevant to anthropology than a relativistic one, as it allows for scientific statements that extend beyond disciplinary boundaries and go beyond the mere collection of different phenomena (Gingrich 2011: 178f, cit. in Pober, 2020: 8). However, Martin Holbraad critiques the prevailing dichotomy between universalism and relativism, suggesting that a universalist approach seeks to explain a belief by appealing to presumed human universals, while a relativist interpretation would consider it in relation to other local beliefs and practices. Holbraad concludes that both positions acknowledge the need to explore the unfamiliar or foreign (Holbraad 2011: 84, cit. in Pober, 2020: 8). Similarly, Christina Toren advocates for abandoning dichotomies from a cultural and social anthropological epistemological perspective (Toren & Pina-Cabral 2011: 11, cit. in Pober, 2020: 8). To gain insight into multispecies ethnography, both relativist and universal attempts to explain phenomena in relation to local practices, beliefs and knowledge making, as well as in relation to presumed human universals can be fruitful and have to be considered in the research process.

1.1.4 SUMMARY OF ONTOLOGIES

For the understanding of multispecies ethnography, it is valuable to assume a subject-independent and species-independent reality, as expressed in critical and new realist positions. This critical ontological perspective on reality as subject-independent (and species-independent), together with a heightened self-awareness about the influence of sensory, emotional, social and ideological constructions into the research process, present a valuable basis for the understanding of multispecies ethnography. While solipsistic notions of reality and their implied ontological relativism can make it difficult to generate verifiable statements about reality, and departing from such a relativist ontological position could be ethically problematic, it is crucial to maintain methodological and epistemological relativist

perspectives to acknowledge multiple ways of knowing. Both relativist and universal epistemological perspectives can be fruitful, if ontological relativism is avoided.

1.2 EPISTEMOLOGIES

The field of epistemology within philosophy delves into inquiries regarding knowledge acquisition, examining the processes through which knowledge is formed and the diverse perspectives on the nature of reality from an epistemological standpoint. While on the first glance, it may seem that positivism (epistemology) corresponds to realism (ontology), and constructivism (epistemology) to relativism (ontology), this is not entirely the case. It is essential to consider the fine adjustments and variations of those approaches relevant for the understanding of multispecies ethnography. This segment explores both positivist and constructivist schools of thought within epistemology and their significance in cultural and social anthropological research.

1.2.1 POSITIVISM

As elaborated in *Reflexionen zur kultur- und sozialanthropologischen Epistemologie* (Pober 2020), positivism originated with Auguste Comte and posits the existence of an objective reality that can be known through logical statements. However, Karl Popper deviated from this strict view by acknowledging the limitations of relying solely on logical statements (Wintersteller 2012: 7, cit. in Pober, 2020: 10). In the context of 21st-century anthropology and social science research, purely logical statements have limited relevance due to the subjective influence of the researcher, particularly in social science studies. Wintersteller (2012: 7f; cit. in Pober 2020: 10) highlights that positivist positions assume objectivity by separating the researcher from the object of study, but this separation is not maintainable in the social sciences due to the inherent interaction in research methodology. Even in the natural sciences, this separation has been proven unattainable, as evidenced by the Heisenberg uncertainty principle (Lincoln & Guba 1994: 106f, cit. in Wintersteller 2012: 6f, cit. in Pober, 2020: 10). Positivist approaches are less suitable for social science investigations that prioritize intersubjective interaction. Kirsten Hastrup agrees with this perspective and emphasizes the need to question the positionality of researchers, recognizing their embodiment and socio-cultural-historical backgrounds (Hastrup 1994: 227f, cit. in Pober, 2020: 11). A similar paradigm shift has occurred in cognitive sciences, moving away from a neglect of the body (Fingerhut et al., 2013: 18, cited in Schlicht 2018, cit. in Pober, 2020: 11).

Given the scientific relevance for cultural and social anthropology to move away from rigid subject-object dichotomies (Gingrich 2011: 181, cit. in Pober, 2020: 11), this section will not further explore positivist currents but instead, delve into constructivist epistemological theories.

1.2.2 CONSTRUCTIVISM

In contrast to positivist perspectives, constructivist epistemological views propose the existence of multiple socially constructed realities rather than one single reality (Wintersteller 2012: 6: cit. in Pober 2020: 11). Constructivist paradigms, found in frameworks like hermeneutics and phenomenology, understand reality as constructed through interaction, emphasizing subjective and intersubjective construction as the basis of knowledge. Thus, knowledge is seen as a result of subjective and intersubjective construction (Wintersteller 2012: 6, cit. in Pober, 2020: 10). However, postmodern approaches to new conceptions of reality and knowledge need to be critically examined. According to these approaches, knowledge is particular, historical, and spatially situated, and depending on its linguistic context. The postmodern assumption of the existence of multiple truths embedded in power relations challenges the notion of a comprehensive truth and is only partially compatible with the ontological assumption of a shared reality. Consequently, postmodern approaches have been criticized for potentially leading to total relativism (ibid.). Martin Holbraad subjects constructivist approaches to fundamental criticism (Holbraad 2011: 88, cit. in Pober 2020: 11). Constructivist theories are considered absurd in that they relativize their own premises. If the world and our perceptions of the world belong to different realities, it follows that constructivism too is “only” a human construct. In opposition to constructivist perspectives, Holbraad argues for an understanding of reality through “*inventive definitions*”, which he also defines as “*pudding to the proof*” (ibid.: 87, cit. in Pober 2020: 12). These inventive definitions of reality stand in contrast to the classical approaches of analytical philosophy and seek to creatively describe concepts that have not (yet) been analyzed by philosophers or are difficult to capture in language. Holbraad emphasizes that the creation of meaning is not a privilege of philosophers but an indispensable and constant aspect of social life. To understand multispecies ethnography, constructivist perspectives on knowledge, wherein knowledge is understood as particular, historical, spatially situated, and linguistically embedded, are particularly valuable. The assumption of the existence of multiple truths embedded in power relations is important to understand basic quests of multispecies

ethnography. However, for scientific and ethical purposes, it is relevant to avoid total relativism.

1.2.3 SUMMARY OF EPISTEMOLOGIES

The critical realist assumption of “one reality” and the new realist approach, wherein the ethnographer’s bias is considered in the construction of such reality, form a solid ontological basis to understand multispecies ethnography itself, as well as the different and entangled ontologies multispecies ethnographers may find in the field. Based on this ontological assumption, constructivist approaches to epistemology prove to be most fruitful, since they allow to acknowledge multiple ways of knowing – a crucial aspect of multispecies ethnography. The assumption of the existence of multiple, constructed truths embedded in power relations is important to comprehend the complex entanglements of multiple epistemologies present in the field. With both relativist and universalist ways of explaining epistemological phenomena in relation to their local embeddedness as well as in relation to presumed human universals, form a solid epistemological basis for multispecies ethnography, as long as ontological relativism is avoided. This section additionally showed that positivist epistemological approaches are not suitable for anthropological knowledge making. Following, I depict some anthropological and philosophical reflections on the definition of knowledge, which become relevant when it comes to grasping the complex entanglements of various epistemologies present in the field.

1.3 DEFINITIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

When it comes to defining what “knowledge” is, Kirsten Hastrup suggests that there are probably as many definitions of knowledge as there are anthropologists (Hastrup & Hervik 1994, cit. in Pober, 2020). When posed with the question of what knowledge means to a group of aspiring cultural and social anthropologists, their answers can vary significantly (cf. Nasr & Pober 2020). Often, diverse perspectives on the types of knowledge and its varied functions become apparent.

From a cognitive science perspective, enactivism provides a pertinent approach to knowledge generation. While not a philosophical theory of knowledge, it aligns with both the ontological perspective of critical realism and the idea that knowledge is constructed through interaction. Enactivist cognition combines realistic views of reality with constructivist knowledge strategies, assuming an objective reality independent of subjects. Inspired by Buddhist and

phenomenological approaches (Schlicht 2018: 1919f, cit. in Pober 2020: 18), enactivism views reality as experienced through constant oscillation between the physical and social environment and its inner perception, shaped by linguistic interaction with others. The “4 *E*’s of cognition” framework in cognitive science offers insights into how knowledge is embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended beyond the individual, emphasizing the role of interaction in socio-cultural-historical contexts (Schlicht 2018: 194f, cit. in Pober 2020: 18). Enactivism considers individual and socio-cultural-historical aspects of knowledge generation, and diverges from positivistic paradigms. The connection between experienced reality and linguistic concepts is highlighted, emphasizing that knowledge often goes beyond language, and that linguistic concepts influence the experience of reality (Pober 2020: 17f).

Many Anthropologists agree with the notion of knowledge being embodied in individuals, extended beyond language, and embedded in the social environment. Kirsten Hastrup illustrates her conception of knowledge as an embodied, social phenomenon in the context of ethnographic field research. Hastrup uses the metaphor of maps and itineraries to illustrate the embodiment of knowledge, emphasizing the body’s fundamental role in navigating and understanding. According to Hastrup, the body with its ecstatic and recessive qualities, is integral to the process, expanding beyond itself and sometimes concealing its experiences (Hastrup 1994: 225f, cit. in Pober 2020: 14). However, Judith Okely emphasizes that knowledge can not be directly linked to immediate sensory data, since even the senses are socio-culturally mediated and interpreted (Okely 1994: 47, cit. in Pober 2020: 20). The variability in experiences among individuals with different backgrounds showcases the socio-cultural-historical influences on sensory meanings and interpretations. Hastrup and Okely both lament the invisibility of anthropologists in ethnographic texts and highlight the need to recognize the embodied nature of experiences. Knowledge, as described by Hastrup, is organized information involving reduction and selectivity (Hastrup 2004: 456, cit. in Wintersteller 2012: 12, cit. in Pober 2020: 20). It translates the world’s complexity into clear yet limited statements, with its organization requiring the examination of specific selection and reduction processes. However, knowledge is perspective-dependent and a social phenomenon rather than an independent object, and involves continuous intersubjective negotiation. Emphasizing the link between knowledge and emotion, Hastrup sees emotions as integral to rationality (Sousa 1990: 16, cit. in Hastrup 1994: 235f, cit. in Pober 2020: 14).

Another crucial aspect of knowledge is highlighted by the concept of “*tacit knowledge*,” introduced by Michael Polanyi (1985). It focuses on non-verbal knowledge, emphasizing that individuals know more than they can tell. This implicit knowledge includes perceptual, decision-making, and behavioural aspects beyond verbal expression. Ethnographers like

Judith Okely recognize the importance of engaging in activities related to the implicit knowledge of the researched community (Okely 1994: 45f, cit. in Pober 2020: 19). For instance, Okely's participation in agricultural tasks helped her understand retired farmers better. Thomas Widlok (Widlok 1994: 180f, cit. in Pober 2020: 19) and Lisa Stevenson (Stevenson 2009: 55f, cit. in Pober 2020: 19) illustrate implicit time perception and cultural perspectives gained through participatory observation. Ingrid Rudie (Rudie 1994: 28f, cit. in Pober 2020: 19) highlights the acquisition of pre-linguistic knowledge in the early phases of fieldwork, and Tamara Kohn (Kohn 1994: 14, cit. in Pober 2020: 19) emphasizes the importance of learning practices without linguistic reliance and situates anthropological knowledge in subtle sensory perceptions resulting from deep involvement with others. Fieldwork, involving prolonged stays, becomes crucial for ethnographic investigations, enabling researchers to accumulate experiences and acquire implicit, enacted knowledge. According to Kohn, anthropological knowledge is not solely derived from translating language but involves tapping into profound interpersonal engagement (Kohn 1994: 7, cit. in Pober 2020: 19).

Through the embodied, perspective-dependent, sensory experience of the physical environment, and continuous intersubjective verbal and non-verbal negotiation within the social environment, knowledge is created as a social phenomenon and can be understood as "*group knowledge*" (cf. Turri et al. 2019, cit. in Pober 2020: 15).

The philosopher John Greco investigates "*group knowledge*" and "*epistemic communities*," challenging the traditional individual-centric focus of epistemology. This shift towards a social perspective emphasizes the role of socio-cultural-historical contexts in shaping knowledge generation (Kvanvig 1992, cit. in Turri et. al. 2019, cit. in Pober 2020: 15). His exploration delves into the social dimension of knowledge creation, highlighting how individuals, through intersubjective interaction, form "*epistemic communities*." This cooperative knowledge generation, including the division of epistemic labor, presents a key focus of Greco's reflection. The social turn in philosophy also addresses the existence of "*group knowledge*," surpassing individual capacities and benefiting all participants. This shift underscores the dependence of knowledge on socio-cultural-historical contexts, a crucial consideration in cultural and social anthropology, which is particularly relevant for understanding multispecies ethnography.

Michel Foucault explores the inseparable connection between knowledge and power, stressing the need to consider knowledge within the contexts of power structures that both reproduce and presuppose it. He asserts that knowledge, in its origins and effects, can never be harmless and independent (Foucault 1976: 73, cit. in Forrester 2017: 217). Foucault's *History of*

Sexuality (1977) delves into power dynamics down to the physical level, illustrating how the body becomes a locus of power between institutions and corporeality (Foucault 1977: 23, cit. in Forrester 2017: 217). Haraway reflects on the subjectivity of knowledge in ethnography through “*situated knowledge*,” highlighting the invisibility of researchers and their resulting invulnerability. The invisibility of researchers perpetuates power dynamics by maintaining structural privileges. Recognizing and addressing these power dynamics, including reflections on researchers’ positioning, is crucial for ethnographic field research (Haraway 1995, cit. in Wintersteller 2012: 10, cit. in Pober 2020:16).

In summary, knowledge can be viewed as a social phenomenon, existing within and beyond individuals and emerging from continuous, discursive exchanges about the experienced reality. Cognition, according to cognitive science perspectives, is embodied, embedded in socio-cultural-historical contexts, action-based, and extends beyond individual bodies and language. Knowledge, from this standpoint, is a dynamic, hybrid social phenomenon constructed and validated in “epistemic communities,” surpassing individual knowledge. Power dynamics in these communities raise questions for anthropological analyses. The importance of emotionality and “*tacit knowledge*,” implicit skills beyond linguistic concepts, is emphasized in particular for anthropological fieldwork. The next section gives a brief overview on how anthropological knowledge is generated and documented in participant observation within these frameworks.

2 ANTHROPOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE-MAKING

As discussed in *Reflexionen zur kultur- und sozialanthropologischen Epistemologie* (Pober 2020), the ethnographer's body as gauge for social situations is at the core of anthropological knowledge making. Anthropologists like Tamara Kohn (1994) and Judith Okely (1994) recognize the importance of embodied experience and sensory perceptions in the field that go beyond language, as well as pre-linguistic experiences. This means that knowledge is not solely derived from intellectual understanding but also from physically engaging with the world through our senses. However, a complete understanding and sharing of other's experience is only possible to a limited extent. As Kirsten Hastrup points out, "*the other's sensory experience, whether or not there is a vocabulary to describe it, can never be completely shared, only imagined*" (Hastrup 1994: 11, cit. in Pober, 2020: 23). While it is impossible to completely grasp the subjective experience of other humans, ethnographers can rely on their own experiences as humans, common sense, and imagination to approximate understanding other humans vicariously (Nagel 1991: 166, cit. in Okely 1994, cit. in Pober 2020: 23). To gain this vicarious knowledge, new experiences are therefore crucial for anthropological knowledge making. By engaging in new encounters and immersing themselves in unfamiliar contexts, anthropologists expand their understanding and bridge the gap between different ways of understanding, perceiving and "*seeing*" the world. As Toren and Pina-Cabral cite, "*every understanding of another culture is an experiment with our own*" (Wagner, cit. in Crook, cit. Toren & Pina-Cabral 2011: 9). At those "*inventive edges*" (Rudie 2011:31, cit. in Pober 2020: 26) between the self and the other, the old and the new, one's own epistemic background and new epistemologies in the field, anthropological knowledge about oneself and others is being created. Beyond that, anthropologists are also encouraged to understand and incorporate different epistemologies into their work. Local knowledge is seen as essential for anthropological understanding, requiring at times the conversion of local categories into analytical concepts, according to Christina Toren (Toren 2011: 16, cit. in Pober 2020: 27). In this regard, André Gingrich (Gingrich 2011: 177f, cit. in Pober, 2020: 27) proposes a comparative anthropology of epistemologies, which adopts a phenomenological approach and compares preferably non-monotheistic epistemologies. However, the process of transforming field experiences into written form is complex. As described by Hastrup and Hervik (Hastrup & Hervik 1994: 177f, cit. in Pober 2020: 30), ethnographers can face challenges in capturing the complexity of sensory perceptions and emotional memories through language. Written field notes are considered inadequate in conveying the full range of experiences, and the importance of non-verbal and non-visual

impressions is emphasized. Implicit knowledge, which cannot be fully translated into text, but can be remembered as “*headnotes*” (Ottenberg 1990, cit. in Hastrup 1994: 232, cit. in Pober, 2020: 30), provide valuable and important insight for ethnographic analysis. In this regard, Díaz de Rada and Cruces also point to the “*conceptual vacuum*” that accrues when analytical concepts aim to describe rituals and social situations. They propose an inclusion of the structures of local meanings into their analysis by using metaphors (Díaz de Rada & Cruces 1994: 101f, cit. in Pober, 2020: 28). They point out, that anthropological discourses and emic concepts can have a mutual influence on the researcher’s perception of empirical data and their analysis. Therefore it is important for researchers to include in their work a thorough reflection of their own socio-cultural-historical and epistemic background, conceptual framework and their positionality in the field to be aware of its impact on their understanding of other humans. Overall, anthropological knowledge is generated through a combination of embodied experiences, the recognition of the limitation of shared experience, the incorporation of new experiences, the understanding of different epistemologies, and the effort to translate social experiences into written form while being aware of the challenges and limitations of language, conceptual frameworks, and theoretical anthropological discourses.

3 SUMMARY OF THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In the first part of this thesis, I laid out the theoretical foundation for this study, focusing on the ontological and epistemological framework relevant to understanding multispecies ethnography. I highlighted the importance of adopting a critical ontological perspective and a heightened awareness of sensory, emotional, social, and ideological influences in the research process. While avoiding ontological relativism remains crucial, I emphasized the necessity of maintaining methodological and epistemological relativist perspectives to accommodate diverse ways of knowing. Constructivist approaches to epistemology prove fruitful in acknowledging multiple truths embedded in power relations, providing a solid basis for multispecies ethnography. With both relativist and universalist ways of explaining epistemological phenomena in relation to their local embeddedness as well as in relation to presumed human universals, a solid epistemological basis for multispecies ethnography is given.

Building upon this framework, I discussed various definitions of knowledge pertinent to this study. Enactivism from cognitive science aligns with critical realism and emphasizes that knowledge is constructed through interaction, embodying both realistic views of reality and constructivist knowledge strategies. Anthropologically, knowledge is viewed as a dynamic, hybrid social phenomenon emerging from continuous discursive exchanges, extending beyond individual experiences and validated within “epistemic communities”. Emphasis is placed on the role of embodied, sensory experiences and the importance of emotionality in anthropological knowledge making.

Anthropological knowledge is derived not only from intellectual understanding but also from physical engagement with the world through the senses. While the subjective experience of others in the field may be incompletely grasped, ethnographers draw upon their own experiences to vicariously understand, bridging different ways of understanding the world. Local knowledge is essential, necessitating the conversion of local categories into analytical concepts and comparisons of epistemologies. The process of transforming field experiences into written form is complex, requiring a thorough reflection on the researcher’s background, conceptual framework, and positionality. Anthropological knowledge is generated through embodied experiences, recognition of the limitations of shared experience, incorporation of new experiences, understanding of different epistemologies, continuous interaction, and translation of social experiences into written form while being mindful of linguistic, conceptual, and theoretical limitations.

4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the last sections, I depicted an ontological and epistemological approach to knowledge relevant for this particular study, which serves to reflect on the methodology of multispecies ethnography. Building upon this conceptual foundation, I explored key facets of anthropological knowledge-making, delving into the distinct ways anthropologists construct knowledge. To better assess multispecies ethnography, I highlighted some relevant aspects of anthropological knowledge making – from the sensory experience in the field to the influence of linguistic concepts on the ethnographer’s perception, and the reductionist process of writing up experiences made in the field. Departing from those assumptions of what there is to know, and how to “know” anything about this reality, I wondered how anthropologists create knowledge not only with fellow humans but especially with more-than-human beings like animals, plants, landscapes, and invisible entities, during their participant observation in fieldwork. To what extent does more-than-human ethnography differ from “human” ethnography? What are the ontological, epistemological, and methodological bases of multispecies ethnography? Is there, if any, a specific methodical aspect to consider when researching on and with more-than-human beings? If, according to Hastrup, ethnographers rely on their common sense, imagination and experiences as humans to approximate understanding other human research participants vicariously during participant observation, to what extent are the experiences of non-human participants knowable at all? And, what does it mean for the anthropologists associated with multispecies ethnography to apply this “method” or way of thinking?

To find out more about this exciting new approach to anthropological research, I joined an online event where “multispecies speakers” were invited to talk about their recent ethnographies with other species, or more-than-human beings. Coming from various backgrounds, the invited speakers talked about their research with rivers, palm trees, birds, and fake animals, among others. In the second part of this thesis, I depict the insights gathered during this first empirical research phase through online participant observation at the Multispecies Speaker Series and semi-structured interviews conducted with some of the speakers and organizers after the event. The following chapter presents the talks of the online event, and highlights relevant findings from the Multispecies Speaker Series and the interviews held with multispecies scholars.

PART II - THE MULTISPECIES SPEAKER SERIES

The *Multispecies Ethnography Group* was created in January 2022 by PhD students who were tasked with organizing a serial event for the *Ethnography Lab* at the University of Toronto, and the talks of the *Multispecies Speaker Series* were held online on February 1st, March 9th, March 29th, April 29th, and May 2nd of 2022. The *Ethnography Lab* at the University of Toronto is a mainly student-organized space for workshops, seminars, talks, discussions, and exchange. To put it in the words of Ridhima Sharma, one of the co-conveners of the event, “the *Ethnography Lab* promotes ethnographic research methods and practices in the university and outside academia. Arranged in interest groups, the lab explores the craft and the impact of ethnography in the contemporary world” (Ridhima Sharma in Sophie Chao’s talk, Chao 2022a, 2:38). Organized by the PhD students Noha Fikry, Bradley Dunseith and Ridhima Sharma, the aim of the Multispecies Speaker Series is, according to Ridhima, “to read, discuss and engage with emerging texts, exploring humans, animals, and place in various parts of the world” and to “explore possibilities, challenges, and politics of writing, researching and thinking with other species” (ibid., 2:31). While all the events were usually held offline, the COVID-pandemic challenged conveners and participants to create digital collegiate platforms and the possibility of online exchange and participation. The Multispecies Speaker Series took place during the summer term of 2022 – towards the end of the pandemic, and was one of the last events of the Ethnography Lab shifted completely to Zoom. Being already accustomed to communicating via Zoom after two years of pandemic restrictions, I was very grateful for having had the opportunity to join the Multispecies Speaker Series online from Vienna. Following, I give a short overview of each of the four talks, to then depict the insights gathered from the talks and the interviews held with Sophie Chao, Anand Vivek Taneja, Noha Fikry, and Bradley Dunseith.

On a typically cold and dark February night, I am sitting at my desk in my room in a shared flat of seven students in Vienna. My laptop illuminates most of the room with its blue light. Only a small table lamp and a dim chain of lights on the bookshelf behind me counter it with some more pleasant, orange-toned light. I am nervously waiting for the “host” of the upcoming Zoom meeting to “let me in”, even though by now, after two years of COVID-19 pandemic I am already very used to meeting people on Zoom. As I am waiting, I take a sip of black tea and hear my flatmates telling each other “Good night” while going to bed. Finally, the host opens the meeting and more than twenty-five small camera recordings or profile pictures of the Zoom meeting show up on my screen. After a few seconds of silence, I can hear the transmitted voice of the speaker Kim TallBear asking the convener Noha Fikry first some organizational questions and then starting to introduce her talk. TallBear’s camera image shows an ample bookshelf in her background, and the camera captures a professionally looking, standing microphone. The participants who have their cameras on are likely in their twenties to forties. I am excited to be able to listen to this special speaker series that would usually be held “offline” in Toronto, Canada. At the same time, I feel shy, insecure, and tired and decide, just like most participants, to turn off my camera after a few minutes, as I noticed that I was overly focused on my own appearance.

(Fieldnotes I: 2)

Indigenous Standpoints and Multispecies Ethnography: A Talk by Professor Kim TallBear

In the very beginning of her talk, the speaker, Kim TallBear, expressed her discomfort with the term “multispecies ethnography” and the dominance of settler colonial language and thought processes within the discourse. Despite this, she acknowledged the importance of engaging in dialogue with researchers who have used the term and explored “multispecies ethnography.” She mentioned her early piece *Why Interspecies Thinking Needs Indigenous Standpoints* (TallBear 2011; URL#3) and her collaborations with Dorion Sagan, Eben Kirksey, and Stefan Helmreich, which influenced her perspectives on language and worldviews. Kim TallBear discussed her collaboration with David Delgado Shorter on the special edition of the American Indian Culture and Research Journal, titled *An Introduction to Settler Science and the Ethics of Contact* (Shorter & TallBear, 2021). She emphasized the

importance of her relations and wanting to work with Indigenous people, while also acknowledging the possibility of engaging in conversation with others. She rejected white intellectual supremacy and used humour as a coping mechanism to address oppressive theoretical frameworks. The speaker declared her decision not to publish with Duke University Press any more, stating her refusal to continue projects with them. She emphasized her prioritization of relations with Native and Indigenous people, highlighting her ongoing collaboration with Eben Kirksey despite her refusal to work with Duke.

Kim TallBear discussed her upcoming chapter co-written with Noriko Ishiyama on *Nuclear Waste and Relational Accountability in Indian Country* (Ishiyama & TallBear, 2022), and explained how their collaboration brought together Ishiyama's fieldwork among indigenous peoples in a nuclear landscape with TallBear's theoretical frameworks. She mentioned her collaboration with Eben Kirksey on a book exploring the interactions of people living in a nuclear waste area. They adopted a familial framework to interpret the tribes' engagement with the federal government in managing nuclear waste. TallBear highlighted the analogy between toxic nuclear relations and toxic personal relations, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging that not all relations are romantic or positive. The speaker concluded her talk by discussing her current research on the role of compulsory monogamy and marriage in settler colonialism, connecting it to the disruption of relations in Indigenous communities and the environment. She expressed her interest in reconstituting and repairing these relations, analysing monogamy and marriage in the context of environmental contamination.

After having received encouraging feedback for my research idea this morning in the “Anthropologisches Laboratorium” by Manuela Ciotti and other students, I am eagerly waiting at my desk to join the second talk of the Multispecies Ethnography Speaker Series on Zoom. The summer semester has just begun, and a spirit of optimism is in the air. In my head, I am going through possible questions that I might ask the speaker after the talk, all related to my research interest, while setting up a nice “background image” and arranging one plant behind me. The delicious lasagna we just had with my flat mates makes my thoughts a bit slow. Finally, the host lets me in, and the event begins. This time, it is Bradley Dunseith opening the session, and he does so in a rather unusual way for an internationally held online event – acknowledging land.

(Fieldnotes I: 3)

**Between Parasitism and Mutuality: Multispecies Ethnography in Plantation Ecologies,
featuring Professor Sophie Chao**

“Toronto or ‘Tkaronto’ has been a site of human activity for fifteen thousand years. This sacred land is the territory of the Huron-Wendat, the Anishinabe First Nations, the Seneca, the Mississauga of the Credit River, and the nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. It is marked by a history of settler colonialism and genocide, as well as resistance. It is a site of ongoing colonial projects, even as their persistence and violence has erased dominant accounts of the city. Today, ‘Tkaronto’, is still the home to indigenous people from across Turtle Island. Intersecting communities consist of those native to this land, indigenous people from other territories, settlers who have come here by choice, communities forced into diasporas by the transatlantic slave trade, or otherwise a result of settler colonialism and imperialism. Alongside this utterance of a land acknowledgement, we invite all of us to think about how we situate our projects vis-à-vis land on which we carry out our research, and on which we operate as students, faculty, and otherwise. Especially in the context of this being a Multispecies Ethnography Group, one of our main aims is to emphasize and think through the role that land, other species and other forms of thought play in our research and projects.” (Bradley Dunseith in Sophie Chao’s talk, Chao 2022a, 1:3-24)

After Bradley Dunseith's land acknowledgment, Sophie Chao was being introduced by Noha Fikry to the audience, and equally opened this session with a land acknowledgement.

I am speaking to you from the unceded lands of the Cadigal people of the Eorine nation here in Australia. And I want to start by acknowledging Cadigal elder's past, present and emergence, and also pay tribute to Cadigal kin, both human, animal, vegetal and elemental. The lands of Cadigal were taken without treaty, compensation or consent. There are lands whose stories have historically been stolen, silenced, or sanitized. But, there are also lands of ongoing indigenous survivance, resurgence, and continuance. (Sophie Chao in Sophie Chao's talk, Chao 2022a, 1:3-24)

Chao proceeded to introduce her articles *The Beetle or the Bug* (2021) and *Seed Care in the Palm Oil Sector* (2018). She explained that she had removed these articles from her book *In the Shadow of the Palms* (2022) for political and ethical reasons, inspired by the concept of the "politics of refusal" by Audrey Simpson, a Native American indigenous scholar. These articles were based on her extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the Indonesian palm oil sector, involving interactions with indigenous groups, economists, plant scientists, and corporate actors. Her research interests encompassed the intersection of ecology, indigeneity, capitalism, health, and justice in the Pacific, approached through the lens of environmental anthropology and multispecies ethnography. Sophie mentioned her book *In the Shadow of the Palms* (2022) which explores the impact of oil palm plantations on the Marind indigenous peoples' sense of place, time, personhood, and interspecies relationships.

Regarding the article *The Beetle or the Bug* (2021) Chao described her methodology, which involved participant observation and understanding the sensory and affective ways in which plantation workers experienced transforming landscapes. She highlighted the multiple knowledge systems and labour forms present in her fieldwork, as well as the different perspectives on symbiotic and parasitic relationships between humans and other species.

Sophie Chao reflected on the ongoing questions raised by her articles, such as issues of justice for humans and non-human species in precarious environments and the potential parasitic nature of the plantation form itself. She also discussed ethical considerations in producing multispecies texts and the risk of romanticizing ferality. The second article, *Seed Care in the Palm Oil Sector* (2018) focused on the care, violence, mutualism, and resistance observed among nursery workers, plant scientists, and economists within the oil palm industry. In conclusion, Chao raised ethical and empirical questions about taking the messiness and complexity of the plantation regime seriously. She challenged the audience to engage critically with the nuances of plantation systems and the potential risks involved in conducting research in such destructive fields.

After a while of carefully listening, I notice how I am feeling moved by the Islamic perspectives on birds presented by Anand Vivek Taneja in his talk. The way he describes certain birds as being seen as poets themselves because of their rhythmic and angelical singing and their position as figures of moral aspirations for humans leaves me with a feeling of amazement. While trying to keep up with the challenging questions following his talk and linking the discussion to my research interest, the meeting abruptly ends. After a few words of thanks and some hand-weaving, the people on my screen disappear. I notice how immersed I was in this discussion, as I slowly take my awareness back to my physical surrounding, and I can't help but remember one sentence Anand just uttered along the way, "[...] it is interesting that at that moment when you are talking about a huge moment of crisis and destruction, you turn to the other-than-human to be able to articulate the true pain of it [...]"

(Anand's talk, 24: 786; Fieldnotes I: 4).

Jinns and Species: A Conversation on Saintly Beings, Religion and Multispecies Ethnography

In the third session of the Multispecies Speaker Series, Anand Vivek Taneja discussed his article *Saintly Animals* (2015) and a non-ethnographic piece related to his ethnography. *Saintly Animals* was published in *Comparative Studies of Southeast Asia and the Middle East* and is connected to his article *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi* (2021). Taneja explored the concept of animals as saints, particularly focusing on the Jinn, who are non-human saintly beings encountered in stories in North India. He described a fourteenth-century ruin in contemporary Delhi that has become a shrine where Jinn are venerated. Taneja emphasized the shapeshifting nature of the Jinn, allowing them to appear in the presence of animals. While Delhi is characterized by ecological devastation, the ruin exists within a thriving, multispecies ecosystem where various animals, including snakes, cats, birds, and ants, coexist with humans. Taneja found that interactions with animals at the ruin were different from the rest of the city, elevating the human-animal relationship beyond mere creaturely existence. Taneja discussed how the Jinn serve as figures of memory, enabling the recovery of a pre-partition Muslim or sacred landscape. Through the Jinn, he argued, the entanglements between humans, animals, and more-than-humans, different from contemporary relations, can be remembered. He highlighted the significance of the invisible

realm in Islam and its ability to bring together human and more-than-human animals, asserting the importance of differentiating the invisible from the transcendent.

In his non-ethnographic piece, Taneja examined the figure of Asad, an Indian politician and scholar, and his book *The Dust of Memories*. The book comprises letters Asad wrote while imprisoned between 1942 and 1945, revealing his deep connection with birds. Taneja retold stories from the book, illustrating Asad's engagement with birds in a garden created by political prisoners. He emphasized Asad's language for multispecies encounters, drawing from a long tradition of Persian and Urdu poetry. Taneja noted that Fernando's texts (Fernando 2017; URL#4) influenced his understanding of the multispecies content in Asad's poetry. He quoted a passage from Asad's writing that depicted birds as divine beings and highlighted their participation in discourse and language. The garden, imagined in poetic form, served as a space for multispecies encounters, where birds and poets could teach each other. Taneja acknowledged an alternative interpretation of Asad's letters but emphasized the central role of birds in the stories and their connection to ecological and racial justice.

He concluded by examining the ethical work performed by birds, comparing it to the figure of the Jinn and Asad's interactions with them. Taneja reflected on the religion of animals, referencing Eduardo Kohn (2013) and Viveiros de Castro (1998). He posed the question of how experiences like Asad's perception of the religion of animals expand our understanding of the entangled worlds of supernatural culture.

The last event of the multispecies speaker series is a discussion on Kajri Jain's recent talk "Vernacularizing nature". Due to the event's nature, I guess, the number of participants is much lower than before. Kajri quickly notices that I am not a familiar face to her and asks for an introductory round. After Ridhima and Bradley, I briefly introduce myself, mentioning my research interest and thanking them for the opportunity to listen to this discussion and to take notes. I feel privileged to be part of this intimate exchange. At the same time, in this intimate setting with only seven participants online in total, turning off my camera would feel rude to me, so I am giving my best, trying to seem attentive and interested by listening carefully, nodding my head from time to time, reacting with a smile to Kajri's jokes, and taking notes. After a while, this ambition turns into a real challenge, as I can barely keep my eyes open or follow what they are saying beyond my bedtime.

(Fieldnotes I: 5)

Vernacularizing Nature with Kajri Jain

Ridhima Sharma opened the session, acknowledging the informal and intimate nature of the meeting and skipping the formal introductions. Bradley Dunseith then introduced the Multispecies Speaker Series and invited Kajri Jain to give her opening remarks. At the beginning of her talk, Jain expressed her bemusement at being part of a multispecies discussion, since her research focused on represented animals. She introduced a graduate student who discussed his fieldwork method in Canadian parks, reflecting on the construction of nature in different environments. Jain shared her dissatisfaction with the apparent digression in art and literature from critiques of a romantic understanding of nature, and questioned the tendency to treat the text as a substitute for the world, paralleling issues seen in postcolonial theory. She suggested reopening the discussion and mentioned her work on nature parks in India, featuring both fake and organic animals. After Sharma and Jain initiated a round of introductions, Dunseith started by appreciating Jain's depiction of the concept of a romantic, transcendental nature in ecocriticism. He referred to an example of a park in Sikkim visited primarily by domestic tourists and discussed the dialogue between different types of parks. Jain placed smaller, bigger, national parks, and the wilderness on a theoretical continuum, drawing from critical geography. She also referenced John Berger's *Why Look at Animals?* (2009) and criticized his romantization of the agricultural. In her upcoming book

Nature in the Time of the Gods she explores the presence of the sacred and the enchanted in modernity. Ridhima Sharma discussed the need to undermine the visual through spatial or sensory aspects in popular cinema, to which Jain responded by discussing the tactile relationship of vision as an exchange of particles. A participant expressed interest in the irresolvability of sensory experience in the environment and suggested highlighting this aspect more. They also asked about Jain's choice of research participants, specifically the security guards. Jain explained that while she talked to many people, the security guards provided valuable insights due to their presence and observations of park visitors. The discussion further explored the difference between real and fake animals in parks, the role of vision as a primary sense, and the materiality of plastic. Jain emphasized the continuum between live and fibreglass animals, questioning the organic/non-organic and living/non-living dichotomy. A participant then reflected on the hyperfunctionalization of art and ecology in today's eco-criticism and academia.

The conversation touched upon the relationship between romanticism, nationalism, and nature as a site of contestation. Jain questioned the link between romanticism and nationalism in current ecological practices. Bradley Dunseith mentioned the post-pandemic euphoria of visiting national parks in Canada and posed questions about the distinctions between parks and gardens, as well as the types of animals found in these spaces. Kajri Jain differentiated parks and gardens, acknowledging the importance of plants. The discussion explored how parks provide more autonomy to nature and plants, while gardens involve more human control. Jain connected these ideas to the mobility of animals and its implications for eco-criticism and religion. Sharma raised a question about the park's visual experience compared to museums and galleries. Following, Jain discussed visual culture, public icons, and their interaction with parks. Bradley Dunseith questioned the criteria for considering someone a non-human ecological being and emphasized the importance of relationships and perspectives in ecology, and Jain suggested considering beings that resemble icons as part of the economy of the icon, acknowledging the different definitions of beings. Sharma asked about the land acknowledgment in Jain's talk, suggesting it could be reiterated at the end of the talk, and Jain agreed and emphasized the need to move beyond eco-criticism and consider indigenous struggles and cosmopolitics for envisioning futurities. At the end, Kajri Jain expressed her gratitude for the participants' inputs and feedback and Bradley Dunseith officially ends the discussion.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE MULTISPECIES SPEAKER SERIES

Certain aspects of “multispecies ethnography” seemed to be most prevalent and recurrent in the talks of the Multispecies Speaker Series and in the interviews I held with Noha Fikry, Bradley Dunseith, Sophie Chao and Anand Vivek Taneja. Questions of language, translation, interdisciplinarity beyond language, epistemic hierarchies and ways of thinking were present in all conversations. It was often discussed how to produce multispecies ethnographic texts in an ethical way, respecting all research participants within a broader field of various language-, knowledge- and communication systems. In most discussions, an exclusive human-centered approach to ethnography was rejected in favour of “taking seriously” other agents, entities, beings, and a relational way of thinking. Certain aspects of Western thought were highly questioned and criticized, such as romantic perspectives on nature and relations and the secularity of scientific knowledge-making. The emersion of multispecies ethnography was often related to concerns about the current global biodiversity loss and climate change. Some speakers revealed their strategies of including other “species” in their ethnographies, and many mentioned and cited related authors as well as their own works.

In this section, I highlight and discuss the main insights gained through the analysis of the talks and interviews. The first subsection starts with an ontological assessment of what there is to know in multispecies ethnography, and depicts the wide variety of more-than-human research participants included in current, past and future projects of multispecies scholars. The second and third subsection deals with multispecies ways of thinking and language, and elaborates how scholars approach those more-than-human research participants theoretically. The last subsection depicts particular methodic strategies to researching on and with more-than-human participants.

1 AGENTIVE BEINGS IN MULTISPECIES ETHNOGRAPHY

The distinguishing feature of multispecies ethnography is its possible inclusion of more-than-human beings into ethnography “as persons”, meaning as active research subjects. What can be seen as “agentive being” or active research participant, varies according to the definition of “agency”. In his books *Making: anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture* (2013) and *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (2021) Tim Ingold argues for a more expansive and relational understanding of agency that encompasses both human and non-human entities. He suggests that agency should not be seen as a property or possession of individual actors but as an emergent quality of the ongoing relationships and interactions between actors and their environment. Ingold emphasizes that agency is not confined to intentional action but is rather a product of the entangled and dynamic processes of life (Ingold 2021: 84f). According to Ingold, all entities in the world, whether living or non-living, possess a degree of agency. For example, a river, a tree, or a tool can be seen as having agency because they actively participate in shaping and transforming the world. The scholar argues that agency is not solely about human intentionality but is also inherent in the vitality, movements, and materiality of the environment. In this view, agency emerges through the interplay of various forces, energies, and materials, and it is distributed throughout the web of relationships within which actors are situated. Therefore, the scholar uses the term “animacy” to describe a wider understanding of “agency” (Ingold 2013:100f). Ingold emphasizes the interconnectedness of the world, with agency arising from the ongoing transactions and engagements between entities. By broadening the concept of agency to animacy, Ingold seeks to highlight the dynamic and reciprocal nature of human-environment relationships, moving away from anthropocentric perspectives (Ingold 2013:95f). This perspective encourages us to consider how non-human entities shape and influence human actions, perceptions, and understandings of the world. It is important to note that Ingold’s conceptualization of agency is part of a broader theoretical framework that examines the relationships between humans and their environments, drawing on ideas from phenomenology, anthropology, and ecology. In the Multispecies Speaker Series, the realm of what was possible to include as agentive beings in ethnography was similarly broadly understood. Not only real animals, like birds, goats, and chicken were at the focus of the researchers, but also palm trees, rivers, nuclear waste, fake animals, invisible spirits, and transcendent birds.

1.1 RIVERS, WATER, AND STONE

The first speaker of the multispecies speaker series, Kim TallBear, has “*been writing on ‘multispecies things’ for [...] twelve years now*” (Kim TallBear in Kim TallBear’s talk, TallBear 2022, 2:24-26), hence she has worked already in many different areas. Being a Dakota, she describes herself as “*a river person*” and sees rivers as her non-human companion (ibid. 23:760-764). She points out, that in the Dakota language there are many ways to refer to rivers and water in general (ibid. 10:313-323), that exceed the possibility of expression in English by far. In her vignettes of one hundred words, she writes about her emotional relation to the river (ibid. 31:1014-1027), while pointing out that she still sees it as a river, not as a person. She also focuses on the relationship of Dakota people to the pipe stone in Minnesota (ibid. 4:96-106), giving an example of an interview partner that uses “*geologists as storytellers*” while having Dakota knowledge of this place (ibid. 14:448-459), and on other perspectives on pipe stone from settlers and scientists.

1.2 NUCLEAR WASTE

In her chapter on *Nuclear Waste and Relational Accountability in Indian Country*, Kim TallBear explores together with Noriko Ishiama tribes living within a nuclear waste landscape (Kim TallBear in Kim TallBear’s talk, TallBear 2022, 7:202-216). Together with Eben Kirksey, she is researching on tribes that live around the Hanford nuclear waste site (ibid. 7:216-239). Applying a familial theoretical framework of toxic relations, they “*look at the way people are relating to settlers, to colonizers, but also to nuclear waste*”. Kirksey and TallBear expand a relational and multispecies thinking to their work with nuclear waste and focus on how toxic relations are being managed (ibid. 8:232-239).

1.3 ALIENS

In her talk, TallBear also mentions her collaborative work with David Delgado for *SETI*, the *Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence*. She was asked “*to get together a native studies working group to advise them on some of the work that they were doing*” (ibid. 5:129-131). Together with David Delgado they looked at the politics of “*alien contact*”, the similarities between colonial politics and narratives of exploration and discovery, as well as “*the way that aliens off-world are treated in similar ways to aliens on-world*” (ibid. 5:143-156), where multispecies thinking comes into play.

1.4 PALM TREES

Sophie Chao, author of the book *In The Shadow Of The Palms* (2022), vividly describes in her talk and our interview her experiences with doing sensory multispecies ethnography among the Marind with different kinds of palm trees. In her research, she studies the perspectives of different actors – the Marind, plantation workers, money makers, and plant scientists – on the oil palm and on the endemic sago palm. She depicts what the sago palm means to the Marind and how they feel physically connected to the plant through wetness. In contrast, the invading species of the oil palm, which requires a lot of water tends to dry out the land and to affect the people's skin negatively. In the context of global economy, she draws conclusions on the physical connectedness and entanglements of different human actors around the globe with the plantation regime through a multispecies lens.

1.5 REARING ANIMALS AND THE INVISIBLE

During her research on human-animal relations between families and their rearing animals in urban Egypt, Noha Fikry studies how the presence of food shape, affect or influence those multispecies relations. Initially inspired to do more-than-human ethnography due to a dissatisfaction with how Donna Haraway accounted for more-than-human beings (Interview with Noha Fikry, Fikry 2022a: 9:297-10:302), she approaches the ethnography with other beings experimentally. She finds that care and violence are simultaneously present in the human-animal relations she studies. To understand this relation better, she does not only spend time with the human participants, but also a significant time with the animals, to be able to account for their presence fully. In the field, she did not only encounter rearing animals like chicken, but also an “invisible” fox, that her research participants were talking about, but which she did not see (ibid. 101-122f).

1.6 BIRDS AND THE TRANSCENDENT

Both Bradley Dunseith and Anand Vivek Taneja focus in their research on birds, albeit from very different perspectives. While Bradley Dunseith uncovers the role of birds in Mumbai's waste management, (Interview with Bradley Dunseith, Dunseith 2022, 2:56) Anand Vivek Taneja studies birds as figures of moral aspiration. (Anand Taneja in Anand Vivek Taneja's talk, Taneja 2022a, 21:692-22:701). A striking aspect they have in common, is that their focus on birds was affected by some kind of “imprisonment” – the confinement due to COVID-19

that Bradley experienced in Mumbai, and the imprisonment of the Indian Muslim politician, philosopher, and theologian Molan Asad during the Second World War. Interestingly, during these times of confinement, their focus shifted out of the window or into the garden to the freely moving birds. Looking out of the window, Bradley observed that during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent closure of street markets, crows and ravens appeared to be more aggressive toward each other, potentially fighting due to food scarcity caused by the absence of food waste from the markets. This observation has led him to formulate his multispecies research focus on the role of animals, such as cats, dogs, and birds in the food waste management of the city of Delhi. Anand Vivek Taneja, author of the book *Saintly Animals* (2015), has focused recently on the letters of the politician and poet Asad, which he wrote from prison. Asad's way to describe the birds he encounters in the garden is not only very poetic but also spiritually connoted. As Taneja points out, the garden as a space for multispecies encounters allowed the poet to be inspired by the bird's poetic way of rhythmic singing and of elevating those birds to angelical creatures of moral aspiration. Taneja contrasts these positive, religious roles of singing birds with the not so appreciated carrion eating birds, which usually would not be seen in such a positive light. In his talk, Taneja reflects on the importance of including the transcendent, which is not the same as the invisible, into ethnographic research.

1.7 SYMBOLIC ANIMALS

As presented in her talk *Vernacularizing Nature: Plasticities of the 'Eco'* (2022), Kajri Jain discusses together with the participants of the Multispecies Speaker Series her interest in the inclusion of symbolic animals as ecological beings in her latest work. In her research, she focuses on nature theme parks and public parks in India (Kajri Jain in Kajri Jain's talk, Jain 2022, 4:87-92), where "fake" animals – sculptures made from plastic or metal – are featured side by side of real, "organic" animals, and questions where "the science stops and the organic begins" (ibid. 29:952-953) when it comes to organic and in-organic relations.

1.8 SUMMARY OF AGENTIVE BEINGS IN MULTISPECIES ETHNOGRAPHY

The special characteristic of multispecies ethnography is its possible inclusion of more-than-human beings as active research subjects. In the Multispecies Speaker Series, the realm of what was possible to include as agentive beings in ethnography was broadly understood. Agency was ascribed to all kinds of entities that contribute in shaping and transforming the

world. Therefore, not only real animals, like birds, goats, and chicken were at the researcher's focus, but also palm trees, rivers, aliens, nuclear waste, fake animals, unseen animals, invisible spirits, and transcendent birds. Multispecies ethnography, thereby, aims to include not only other species like plants and animals in research but expands towards a variety of more-than-human beings, that do not necessarily fall under the classification of "species" – such as spirits and the unseen – to which a certain agency is equally ascribed. In the following subsection, I display how to know those more-than-human research participants, as discussed in the talks and interviews with scholars of the Multispecies Speaker Series.

2 **METHODICAL APPROACHES TO MULTISPECIES ETHNOGRAPHY**

The non-human at the centre of multispecies ethnography asks for a thorough methodological and ethical reflection on anthropological knowledge making. The scholars of the Multispecies Speaker Series talked about their methodical approaches – from deep multi-sensory immersion to imaginative writing – and thereby shared their inventive approaches to the more-than-human.

2.1 **DEEP MULTI-SENSORY IMMERSION**

Sensory immersion and bodily engagement with the field are principles of participant observation in general, but particularly relevant when it comes to the inclusion of other-than-human beings into ethnography. In our interview, Sophie Chao elaborates on the importance of sensory immersion in the field, which includes listening to the stories, songs and narratives about the more-than-human being, which in the case of her research were palm trees. She lists the methods through which she experienced the field,

“[...] Sensory immersion, bodily engagement with the landscape, walking, to the encounter of sago palms, transpassing oil palm plantations, to touch the bark, to observe the morphology of the tree, to listening to the stories that people had to say about one particular tree, about one particular organism, its pasts, pasts that they could read from the bark, from the nature of the leaves, and so forth; so deep multisensory immersions; kind of immersion in smells and sounds and sights, all of which were accompanied by stories, dreams and songs, through which people would flash out, quite literally, the stories of these living beings.” (Interview with Sophie Chao, 6:188f)

For her fieldwork on palm oil plantations, Chao applied “*deep multisensory immersions*”, using all senses to grasp her environment. A part from this sensory immersion, methods like participating in everyday life, and documenting discourses are “*not particularly new*”, but applied to different subjects, according to Chao (ibid. 9:283).

2.2 **OBSERVATION, INTERACTION, AND ENCOUNTERS**

When it comes to include “real” animals, Bradley Dunseith mentions in our interview how his primary approach to research with animals was through observation and interaction of and with the animals, but in particular, the observation of human-animal interactions of other

humans with the animals. Dunseith refers to Radhika Govindrajan's *Animal Intimacies* (2018) which he likes to take as good example of how to attend to human animal relationships in an ethnographic way (Interview with Bradley Dunseith, Dunseith 2022, 12:395f). For his own research, he plans to focus on this interaction between humans and animals as he specifies,

"[...] So, like, those moments of interaction and what tethers the relationship together, mostly the act of feeding and eating, so yeah, that, and then like sort of, I mean there would be more observation, like understanding, how animals assemble in a certain place, and why one place or the other [...]" (ibid. 3:88f)

Observing patterns in the animal's behaviour, particularly in situations of contact or interaction with humans is crucial to understand and include them in ethnography.

Derek, a graduate student in Kajri Jain's department, mentioned in Jain's talk his unique approach to multispecies encounters, employing walking as a strategy to engage with animals and humans in nature.

"[...] I'm conducting fieldwork in various parks across Canada, utilizing walking as a methodology to encounter animals, humans, and nature in those areas. I'm contemplating the construction of nature in each of these diverse environments."
(Derek in Kajri Jain's talk, Jain 2022, 3:55f)

Walking through Canadian forests has proven to be a fruitful means of exposing oneself to multispecies encounters with animals, nature, and other humans and to allow a thorough reflection of what "nature" means in different environments. However, what an animal really feels or thinks remains out of the scope of human understanding. While considering the limits of human understanding of animal behaviour, claims are still possible to make, according to Dunseith,

"[...] Though certainly you can never know what it is like to be someone else or something else, you can still make observations about the world, and that is how we sort of create our sense of what the world is." (ibid. 6:174f)

According to Dunseith, it would be limiting to think of human beings without considering the wider ecology and environment, including bacteria, fungi, and spiritual entities (ibid. 6:187f). During his preliminary research phase in Mumbai, Bradley Dunseith made observations of crows during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and their increased aggression towards each other due to limited food sources, as street market had to remain closed. Inspired by these observations, he plans to research on the role of animals like crows, cats, and dogs in the food waste management of Mumbai. Dunseith emphasizes that the possibility of incorporating other actors and entities depends on the particular fieldwork experience and on the importance given by human research participants to those beings. Chao agrees, that while it is certainly

not possible to understand a more-than-human being outside of a human perspective, it is helpful to include various different human perspectives to get a broader picture. For her research, she allowed for multiple perspectives to influence her understanding of the sago palm and the oil palm by applying a multi-actored method.

2.3 THE MULTI-ACTORED APPROACH

Sophie Chao mentions, that for her research she aimed to include the perspectives of a wide range of different actors in the field. While acknowledging that a “*holistic understanding*” is not possible, Chao aimed to “*bring as many voices into the mix as possible*” (Interview with Sophie Chao, Chao 2022c, 5:201f), which in her case were the voices of indigenous men, women, youth, elders, scientists, agronomists, and particular perspectives. When it comes to this multi-actored approach to multispecies ethnography it is, according to Chao, essential to reflect on epistemic hierarchies and possible violence and to question which human’s perspectives are being prioritized, which discourses are foregrounded and why. Additionally, Chao includes the different actors’ emotions toward the plant in her field, pointing out that the plant was not reducible to one particular perspective,

“[...] there were some really intense emotions surrounding, you know, grieve, anger, resentment, but also pity and compassion, empathy. This plant didn’t exist as any single one thing, it was just a series of different identities, and different affective states, all of which were part of its, you know, what I call dispersed ontologies” (ibid. 7:211f)

To grasp the plant’s “*dispersed ontologies*” (ibid.), it was according to Chao central to include the affect of plant-human-relations, apart from different ways of thinking, storying and theorizing about the plant (ibid.)

2.4 THE “FOLLOW-THE-THING” APPROACH

Another methodological approach to multispecies ethnography applied by Sophie Chao was the “*George Marcus follow-the-thing*” approach (Interview with Sophie Chao, Chao 2022c, 7:222f), as she mentions in our interview. Trying to trace the transformations which oil palm has gone through, from being a West-African, semi-wild crop to a global and contemporary commodity, while focussing on “*the ways in which its career has been shaped by colonial circuits, race, and the plantation logic as a material form but also racializing assemblage*” was crucial to situate the palm tree within its broader socio-cultural-historical context, within

a broader political economy of race, labour, and capital. Even though she mentions that this was not the main focus of her research, it was however an important perspective to contextualize the reality she was writing about within a bigger, historical picture (ibid.)

2.5 IMAGINATION AND EXPERIMENTAL WRITING

The significance of including animals and more-than-human beings in ethnographic research has become evident during the Multispecies Speaker Series. But how to approach the inclusion of more-than-human beings in ethnographic writing? In our interview, Noha Fikry refers to scholars of history and religion, who explore the subjectivity or the self of the animals from a religious perspective and come to the conclusion that “*animals also have souls, they are also important as beings, they are just differently important from humans*” (Interview with Noha Fikry, Fikry 2022a, 13:405f). During her research she encountered various kinds of invisible more-than-human beings, most of them “jinns”, or spirits, but also an unseen fox that was imagined or talked about but not physically there when she was present (ibid. 2:58f, 4:114f). Including those invisible and transcendent beings in ethnographic thinking and writing certainly presents a challenge, but Noha Fikry explores the possibilities of experimental ethnographic writing styles in this regard. During her fieldwork, she encountered a situation where three chickens were missing and people were assuming that it must have been a fox who stole them. By “*taking both the people and the beings seriously*” and “*remaining open to the potential that this story and the beings are real*”, Fikry was able to present the unseen and invisible through experimental writing in her ethnography (ibid. 4:114f). She elaborates on one part of her experimental piece saying that,

“In that story, the main actor, or one of the main actors is a fox. So what I do is that I narrate the story from the voice of the fox, and I say that, okay, we don’t know how a fox talks, but I think that we can [imagine]. [...] In the story the fox never appears, like, nobody saw the fox, so it’s basically a story about three chickens which were stolen from someone’s rooftop and the people, the neighbours are trying to figure out who stole them, and they ended up concluding that it’s a fox who came and took these three chickens and ate them, so it is the challenge of okay, how did they know, nobody saw the fox, so what should I do as an ethnographer to an extent, should I take the story and the fox seriously, and how can I do that?” (ibid. 4:114-5:152)

Engaging in different possibilities, and experimentally writing from different perspectives present in the field makes for a deeper understanding and elaboration of an ethnographic situation. In Noha Fikry’s example of the absent chicken, she employed three different writing

styles, one distancing from more-than-human actors due to its analytical and theoretical framework, one taking both humans and more-than-human actors seriously, and one narrating from the perspective of a fox. Fikry emphasizes the experimental nature of including more-than-human actors “*at this stage*” (19:629) of multispecies ethnography. She acknowledges the limitations of interpreting more-than-human voices or thoughts, while also recognizing the influence of human interpretation in understanding non-human actors (ibid. 7:209f).

2.6 SUMMARY OF METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO MULTISPECIES ETHNOGRAPHY

To grasp the more-than-human in an ethnographic situation, the scholars of the Multispecies Speaker Series suggested various innovative methodic approaches. The sensory immersion of the ethnographer in the field is part of current ethnographic practise. However, in multispecies ethnography, a deep multi-sensory immersion is advisable to understand the more-than-human with all senses. Additionally, observation of the more-than-human beings, and the interaction with it, allow for a better understanding. Particularly, the engagement with human perspectives, stories, and understandings of the more-than-human are relevant. While it is certainly not possible to understand a more-than-human being outside of a human perspective, it is helpful to include various different human perspectives in the course of a multi-actored and “follow-the-thing” approach. Through imaginative and experimental writing, the more-than-human can be accounted for in ethnographic writing. The next subsection delves into the importance of language in multispecies ethnography, especially in regard to various epistemologies present in the field.

3 LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT IN MULTISPECIES ETHNOGRAPHY

Multispecies ethnography is situated at the intersections of different ways of sensing, knowing, and communicating. Aiming to include more-than-human research participants, its ways of producing and communicating knowledge are experimental, interdisciplinary, and at times artistic. Within this diverse scope of knowledge-making and communicating, language holds a crucial role. Western secular-scientific ways of thinking are often found limiting in comparison to many other ways to understand worldly and transcendent entanglements of beings.

3.1 MULTISPECIES THINKING IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE FIELD

As linguistic reflexivity is essential to ethnographic research (cf. Masi de Casanova & Mose 2017), many speakers uttered concerns and reflections about the use of language within the whole process of ethnographic knowledge-making and the multispecies discourse, having faced challenges when translating “*into the field*”, and “*out of the field*” (ibid.:4). Their research participants’ languages often allow for a different and broader way of thinking about multispecies actors than academic English. For instance, Kim TallBear related her experiences with the Dakota language, and the diverse possibilities to think about water in Dakota.

“One of the things that really struck me when talking to language speakers is that very deep, fundamentally very different things are possible to think in that language versus English. [...] The idea of the connectedness and what is carried through water, and the connectedness of our bodies to water, and our lands to water, and our non-human relatives to water. So, there is in that little ‘water is life’, three words in English, you could write an entire book about that [in Dakota].”

(Kim TallBear in Kim TallBear’s talk, TallBear 2022, 10:303f)

In her experience, Dakota has a very rich vocabulary and diverse ways of thinking about water, which would be hard or even impossible to translate fully into English. In Sophie Chao’s fieldwork for her book *In The Shadow Of The Palms* (2022), several languages are present at once in the field. Chao found her research participants “*code-switching*” between the Marind terminology of “*friends and enemies*” and a “*secular-scientific-biologic*” terminology of “*parasites and mutualists*” (Sophie Chao’s talk, Chao 2022a, 12:386f) when referring to sago palm and oil palm plantations. She observed that those two terminologies were co-present in her field, as well as embedded in hierarchies and their contestations.

“They were not mutually exclusive idioms to describe these more-than-human relations, although of course those Marind that were in the sort of activist camp, you know opposed to the oil palm industry, very much rely primarily on the idiom of friends and enemies” (ibid. 13:196)

The use of language thereby can become a tool of resistance to neocolonial and epistemic violence in the field. Using terms from the Global North can become obsolete when the language of the field offers a variety of ways to refer to “*multispecies*” relations, as Noha Fikry mentioned in our interview. Referring to her fieldwork in rural Egypt and her recently published chapter *Tarbiyya* (2022) she points to the challenge of creating a better understanding of multispecies relations within the linguistic realm of the field,

“There is a space in the conceptual tool-kit from the Global South to include human and non-human relations but for me, one of the interventions is also to do it in Arabic, so it doesn’t have to be ‘multi-species’, because this is a word that is not used in my field at all, but the challenge is basically to use words and lexica and tools from the field to develop new understandings of human and non-human relations”

(Interview with Noha Fikry, Fikry 2022a, 27:897)

It remains open to the researcher how to include linguistic tools from the field to describe multispecies relations and eventually translate them to their audiences. The next section presents some possible ways of translating from the language of the field for an audience used to academic English.

3.2 TRANSLATING THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FROM THE FIELD

Some scholars “*engage in translation work every day*” (Kim TallBear in TallBear’s talk, TallBear 2022: 3:57), as Kim TallBear states, and aim for the simultaneous use of various languages within academic discourse, while others choose to leave the work of translation partially to their audiences when it comes to using specific terms in their ethnographies. Sophie Chao mentioned in our interview, that in her book *In The Shadow Of The Palms* (2022), she would often use Marind terminology for central concepts, as well as English translation,

“I used their terms for concepts that were theirs, so for instance, there are two central concepts, you know, material bodily concepts, which are skin and wetness, and these sort of bodily metaphors for shared fluids and flesh that are distributed across species lines, so I use skin and wetness, but a lot of the time I use ‘igid’ and ‘dubadub’, which are their own terms, right, same with oil palm, I use their word for it, as much as

possible, same with the sago palm.” (Interview with Sophie Chao, Chao 2022c, 16:526ff)

Not translating some words in an ethnography for an audience that is not fluid in both languages can make “*for a harder read*” and alienate audiences, but in the end, “*the people who will bother to read, who will bother to do the labor of learning [the language], are the people with whom you want to be in a conversation*” (ibid. 17:533f). Choosing not to translate words or passages therefore also impacts the accessibility of an ethnography and the “choice” of one’s audience.

3.3 LINGUISTIC AND EPISTEMIC HIERARCHIES

In the first talk of the Multispecies Speaker Series, the speaker Kim TallBear opened the session with a thorough critique and reflection of the linguistic aspect of multispecies ethnography. According to her, multispecies ethnography is just one of many ways of thinking about the world. Regarding the etymology of the term “species”, she states that, “*species is a robust way to organize the universe or the planet, but it doesn’t have to be that way*” (Kim TallBear in Kim TallBear’s talk, TallBear 2022, 2:53f). TallBear points to the hegemonic dynamic in the discourse on multispecies ethnography, which at times seems ignorant of indigenous thinking, and criticizes scholars like Bruno Latour regarding their stance on ecologic thinking. In her talk she laments that, “*they don’t know indigenous thinking exists, like, they think this is all new*” (ibid. 6:160f). She illustrates the distressing situation of someone speaking a non-dominant language having to adapt constantly to the “*settler language*” (ibid. 4:95f) of academic discourses by engaging in translation work. TallBear points out, that specific languages come with specific ways of knowing, and adds that “*languages are conditioned by different world views, [and] different moral and ethical assumptions*” (ibid. 2:35f). Regarding her fieldwork among the Marind in Indonesia, Sophie Chao clearly states, that she is aware of “*drawing from a particular epistemology, namely secular scientific biology*” and that there are “*other ways of describing these interspecies realities and relations, depending on what epistemology one draws from*” (Sophie Chao’s talk, Chao 2022a, 9:259f). A crucial aspect present in all conversations of the Multispecies Speaker series was related to the hierarchies among different theoretical frameworks present in multispecies discourse and research. Most of the speakers positioned themselves against a “*secular-scientific*”¹ perspective on “*multispecies*” relations. The Western dichotomy of

1 Kim TallBear’s talk (TallBear 2022, 20:651f); Sophie Chao’s talk (Chao 2022a, 9:258f); Anand Vivek Taneja’s talk (Taneja 2022a, 10:320f); Kajri Jain’s discussion (Jain 2022, 29:952f); Interview with Noha Fikry

human/nature was criticized throughout the speaker series. It was described as problematically rooted in romanticism, and linked to colonialism, exploitation, and destruction. However, in our interview, Sophie Chao also points out that just as there is the risk of essentializing and idealizing indigenous thought and seeing it as static and idealized “*wisdom*” (Interview with Sophie Chao, Chao 2020c, 21:689ff), there is also the risk of flattening the West and overseeing “*fascinating, emancipatory, counter-hegemonic theories and activisms*” (ibid, 24:774ff) emerging from Western institutions. In this regard, Noha Fikry recommends *Changing theory* (2022) by Dilip M. Menone. In our interview, Chao emphasizes, just like Kim TallBear in her talk (Kim TallBear’s talk, TallBear 2022, 2:40f), the importance of acknowledging indigenous thinking as crucial, flexible and innovative standpoint in multispecies ethnography. She pleads for staying in conversation with each other and with different ways of thinking, all while reflecting on epistemic hegemonies.

“At the end of the day, stalemates, and segregations of, you know, this is my camp or way of knowing and that’s yours, I don’t think is the way to go, for either party. We can only really forge new and different futures by being in conversation with one another. It’s more about the power field that we need to start to rethink. Why is it that certain knowledges are considered more valid than others and what are the consequences of those hierarchies of power across epistemologies?”

(Interview with Sophie Chao, Chao 2022c, 22:722ff)

Regarding the study of non-humans, it remains important to ask which perspectives are prioritized and which human’s discourses are foregrounded and why, according to Chao. (ibid. 10:302ff). As different epistemologies come with different lexica and languages, the speakers critically assessed the terminology of “multispecies ethnography”. With its etymology, it draws from a way of thinking that might subtly perpetuate existing epistemic hegemonies, if left unreflected.

3.4 THE TERMINOLOGY OF MULTISPECIES ETHNOGRAPHY

Kim TallBear expresses her discomfort with the term “multispecies ethnography” and its association with settler colonialism. She distances herself from the term but acknowledges the importance of engaging with those who have used it, such as Eben Kirksey. During the discussion after Kim TallBear’s talk, Noha Fikry questions, whether new ways of describing the research with other beings rather than “species” should be found (Noha Fikry in Kim

(Fikry 2022a, 3:69f); Interview with Bradley Dunseith, (Dunseith 2022, 7:205f; 10:314f); Interview with Sophie Chao (Chao 2022c, 6:185f), 19:628f; Interview with Anand Vivek Taneja (Taneja 2022b, 8:314f)

TallBear's talk, TallBear 2022, 15:484ff). Answering to Fikry's question, TallBear states that she continues to write under the framework of "multispecies" while also troubling the terminology simultaneously. TallBear finds that a productive thinking based on mutually respectful relations is key for ethical research with other beings (ibid, 17:545ff). Sophie Chao has moved away from the term "multispecies" in her scholarship, as it is "*itself very much a product of a particular dominant secular scientific epistemology*" which has been criticized for various reasons (Sophie Chao in Sophie Chao's talk, Chao 2022a, 13:412ff). Instead, she prefers to use the terms "other-than-human" or "more-than-human", but doesn't like "non-human" as it comes with a negative connotation, according to her (ibid, 13:437ff).

3.5 SUMMARY OF LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT IN MULTISPECIES ETHNOGRAPHY

Language is tied to the way we think and perceive, and as such an essential part of knowledge-making-processes. The choice of language used in ethnographic writing is situated in a field of epistemic hierarchy among different ways of knowing, tied to different languages. Translating between those various ways of knowing present in the field can certainly become a challenge, in particular when the translatability of concepts is not given. The use of language can thereby also become a tool of resistance to neocolonial and epistemic violence in the field. However, it remains open to the researcher how to include linguistic tools from the field to describe multispecies relations and eventually translate them to their audiences. The terminology of "multispecies ethnography" was criticized by the scholars due to its possible perpetuation of epistemic violence regarding the more-than-human. In the following subsection, I depict the ways of thinking about the more-than-human as discussed by the scholars.

4 MULTISPECIES WAYS OF THINKING

As Kim TallBear pointed out during her talk, it seems like some scholars engaging in the discourse on “multispecies ethnography” are unaware of the existence of indigenous relational thinking. TallBear elaborates that her personal approach to dealing with this subtle, but still hurtful dynamics is through humor,

“[...] I think colonized peoples who have dealt with multiple, many, many generations of trauma and having to survive in a world in which your worlds were attempted to be wiped out by the settler; you develop a really moderate sense of humour.” (Kim TallBear in Kim TallBear’s talk, TallBear 2022, 6:157)

This section deals with the ways the scholars of the Multispecies Speaker Series think within their research on the more-than-human.

4.1 RELATIONAL THINKING

Most speakers referred to the entanglements, interactions, and connections between humans and other beings and things as relations. Some were described as familial, “non-romantic” and possibly toxic relations by Kim TallBear. She compares familial relations to the relations humans have with nuclear waste, and mentions that some relations are in fact toxic, *“but still your relations”* (Kim TallBear’s talk, TallBear 2022, 8:243). TallBear ties compulsory monogamy in settler colonialism to the ways the land has been treated and many sorts of relations have been disrupted, and aims to find ways to repair and restore formerly disrupted relations. Sophie Chao focuses on different kinds of relations among species. She investigates *“necro-biopolitical relations”* among beings which she describes as *“relations of making life and letting die, but also making die and letting live”* (Sophie Chao’s talk, Chao 2022a, 4:121ff). Researching on palm oil plantations, she found relations of care and violence between humans and plants, which resonated with Noha Fikry’s current research and her findings on animals who are resisting care and thereby expressing their agency in the human-animal relations. Chao describes parasitic and mutualistic, symbiotic and antagonistic, and friendly and hostile interspecies relations (ibid, 8:243ff), and raises questions of interspecies justice (ibid, 8:249) in her work. Anand Vivek Taneja found exalted relations between humans and animals within a ruin in the city of Delhi, which has turned into a *“sort of shrine”* (Anand Vivek Taneja’s talk, Taneja 2022a, 2:28). Whereas human-animal relations in other parts of the city were likely creaturely and animals were either removed from the city or treated as meat or beasts of burden, the religious sanctification of them through the idea of the shape-

shifting spirit, the Jinn, has led to a shift in hierarchies between animals and humans. This awe-inspiring relation to animals in the ruin in Delhi might also explain the “*flourishing, multispecies ecosystem*” within the city, which is “*one space of actually extreme ecological devastation*”, according to Taneja (ibid. 3:32f). In his work, Taneja emphasizes supernatural, transcendent, and invisible relations between humans, animals, ghosts, Jinn, and other spirits and points to fluid or shifting hierarchies among them. He finds that animals, in particular birds, are sometimes seen as having religious relations to the transcendent too.

Kajri Jain presented her work on “*real*” and “*fake*” animals in Indian Nature Parks and elaborates on visual relations. She describes vision as an “*exchange of particles*” and therefore a “*tactile one*” (Kajri Jain’s talk, Jain 2022, 9:265ff) and pleads to rethinking vision as an ecological relation embedded in hierarchies. Jain seems to be critical of romantic relations between humans and animals and their imagined mutuality saying, “*Just because one can love an animal and really forge a relationship with it, doesn’t necessarily mean that this is somehow liberatory for the animal*” (ibid. 9:287ff). She understands ecology as fundamentally relational, and questions “*Who counts and how? What counts and how? What is animated for whom?*” (ibid. 30:983ff). Jain pleads for “*taking the economy of the icon seriously*” and for including “*thing[s] that look like being[s] and [their] knowledge as looking like a being*” (ibid.) into ethnographic thinking. However, relational thinking was not limited to research participants and other beings. Scholars connected through the discourse on multispecies ethnography were at times described as in “*relations of obligations*” (Kim TallBear’s talk, TallBear 2022, 17:558) and the importance of respectful mutual relations for ethical knowledge-making was highlighted. Kim TallBear chooses her interactions carefully and mentioned that she wants to be around the “*relations that matter*” (ibid. 7:191) to her. She points out, “*I am a relational being and a relational thinker, and I act out of relations of obligations*” (ibid. 7:197) and Noha Fikry asked about the relation between the ethnographic writer and their audiences (ibid. 18:594ff). Bradley Dunseith reflects on the human focus of multispecies ethnography and understands most ethnographic work as deeply embedded in human relationships. He mentions Anna Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), and points to the anthropological aspect of humans finding and cultivating mushrooms. Dunseith pleads for “*thinking critically about the social and political lives of non-humans, or the socio-political realms in which these interactions take place*”, but with the people in them. (Interview with Bradley Dunseith, Dunseith 2022, 11:359ff). The next section illustrates a common denominator among the participants of the multispecies speaker series. While relations between humans and plants, animals, landscapes, the transcendent, and

the invisible were studied always also in consideration of the emotional aspect of those relations, they were not understood “romantically”.

4.2 OPPOSING ROMANTICISM

Apart from being “*bemused at being part of a multispecies kind of discussion*” (Kajri Jain’s talk, Jain 2022, 2:40), Kajri Jain is also “*bemused by the ways in which art, art making, art criticism, ecocriticism, art history but also literature have suddenly seemed to kind of just embrace the idea that the text somehow stands in for the world*” (ibid, 3:69f). Jain laments how some of the multispecies writing tends to go back to a romantic notion of nature, “*treating it as a thing*” (ibid, 3:80), and ignoring formerly concerted critique. Referring to Jain’s talk, Bradley Dunseith adds that romanticism might be still subtly present in many areas,

“*The romantic transcendental nature is still very much alive and well, not just in this eco-writing or criticism or environmental activism, but in the sort of practices of people and how people all sort of engage with this capital ‘N’ Nature*” (ibid. 6:167f)

Jain positions herself against romanticism or rationalism, in the face of current global ecological crises and finds that apparently, a certain dichotomic thinking between nature/culture has not yet been overcome in academic discourse (ibid.16:522f). Other scholars also oppose to romantic perspectives on “nature” and multispecies relations. Kim TallBear takes up a clear stance against romanticizing relationships and against romanticism as such. She aims to “*disabuse the people*” of the idea that all relations are “*essentially romantic and positive*” (Kim TallBear’s talk, TallBear 2022, 8:240f). Rather, there are toxic relations too, just like relations to nuclear waste or toxic family relations, but “*they are still your relations*” (ibid.). Sophie Chao refers to Anna Tsing’s article *Getting by in terrifying times* (2018) where Tsing writes about her ambivalent feelings regarding the romantic perception of her book *Mushroom at the End of The World* (2015), emphasizing the wrongly attributed romantic perspectives to multispecies ethnography (Sophie Chao’s talk, Chao 2022a, 9:268ff). Answering Bradley Dunseith’s question (ibid, 14:434ff) on the risk of romanticizing relations within multispecies ethnography, Chao refers to her chapter in the volume *The Promise of Multispecies Justice* (2022d), where she emphasizes, that not all multispecies relations are good per se, and refers to inherently toxic or violent relations that also constitute the “*multispecies world*” (ibid, 14:448ff). Relations are thereby to be thought of as non-romantic. However, the speakers also opposed to an overtly “rational” or scientific-secular approach to human to more-than-human relations.

4.3 OPPOSING SCIENTIFIC SECULARISM

Anand Vivek Taneja advocates “*taking religion seriously*” (Anand Vivek Taneja’s talk, Taneja 2022a, 11:329f) as a coherent discourse and pushes against a merely rational understanding of more-than-human beings that must “*agree with secular ontologies*” (ibid.). In his research on Indian Muslim poetry ethics and politics, he focuses on transcendent human-animal relations. Looking into Persian and Urdu poetry, and Punjabi religious literature, he found that while certain carrion birds with a rather negative connotation do not appear in poetry, they hold an important place in religious literature. In the form of the Jinn, they get sanctified and turn into figures of moral aspiration for humans, and any previously existing hierarchies between them and humans vanish. Taneja refers to Mayanthi Fernando’s concept of “*supernatureculture*” (Fernando 2017, URL#4) and the importance of including transcendent relations in multispecies ethnography. He expands Haraway’s concept of *species companionship* (cf. Haraway, 2005) with the idea that species companionship doesn’t happen only “*with my living cat, but with my dead one too*” (Anand Vivek Taneja’s talk, Taneja 2022a, 3:86ff) and explains religious relations to birds he found in Asad’s letters. While making a distinction between “*the invisible*” and “*the transcendent*”, Taneja sees both aspects as relevant to think of in multispecies encounters, and to open up “*a world of thinking differently*” and less attached to the material world (ibid). Similarly, Noha Fikry sees it as a challenge for her current fieldwork to “*find ways to account for other beings*”. She seeks ways to “*push against the secularity of multispecies ethnography*” and to include unseen and unknown beings in ethnography (Interview with Noha Fikry, Fikry 2022a, 3:67ff). What remains essential to ethnography is to take serious the perspectives of the human research participants in the field.

4.4 “TAKING SERIOUSLY”

“*Taking something seriously*” refers to allowing oneself to fully adopt a different way of understanding something, in order to grasp it in its full complexity. Sophie Chao, who wrote about her experiences on palm oil plantations among the Marind explains in her talk the complexity of glocal connections of violence and care. Referring to the entanglements of consumers of palm oil products, and the lethal ecology of oil palm, she raises the ethical and empirical question of “[...] *what [...] it mean[s] to take seriously the messiness and the complexity of the plantation regime itself?*” (Sophie Chao’s talk, Chao 2022a, 11:333-336). To think about a plantation within its broader context of global economy, and the entanglements

that come with a highly complex web of social relations attached to it, while also considering local relations of care and violence, allows for a more holistic picture of the oil palm. Kim TallBear, professor of Native Studies, refers to her experience of making her students take the role of science in colonialism seriously, as a means to understand where possible feelings of discomfort might come from (Kim TallBear's talk, TallBear 2022, 20:647-21:671). To take the role of science in colonialism seriously seems like an important condition to understanding current forms of epistemic violence and discomfort. When Kajri Jain, in the discussion of her talk, answers a question about who or what counts as ecological being, she suggest to include visual representations of beings into this group (Kajri Jain's discussion, Jain 2022: 30:986-990). When it comes to world views, religion, or "*superstition*", Anand Vivek Taneja and Noha Fikry share a similar stance on "*taking 'superstition' seriously*". In our interview, Noha Fikry elaborates on more-than-human ethnographic writing and rhetorically asks at some point, "[...] *what happens when we take religion seriously in ethnographic writing [?] [...]*" (Interview with Noha Fikry, Fikry 2022a, 3:96-97). Still experimenting with a way of writing about more-than-human beings, she posits later on, that it is important to "[...] *[take] both the people and the beings seriously, by just remaining open to the potential that this story and the beings are real and are there even if I can't see them*" (ibid. 4:114-117) and reflects on the possibility of including invisible or unseen agentive beings in ethnography. What characterizes Noha Fikry's and Anand Vivek Taneja's approach is their focus on people's world views, advocating strongly for going beyond one's own limiting intellectual background and fully adapt one's participants perspectives on the world. In our interview, Noha Fikry laments that despite the attempts of ethnographers to understand their research participants, there still remains a certain distance between the participant's perspectives and what the ethnographers are fully ready to adopt:

"[...] *we are trained to write ethnography in a very particular way and we are trained to respect what people are saying and to take it seriously, and this is great, and I love this about ethnography, but at the same time usually there is an assumption that you are also still trying to maintain that distance between what people are believing in and in what you are willing to potentially believe in [...]*"

(ibid. 5:162-6:168)

While many ethnographers choose to believe in their research participants' views, there often remains a reluctance to fully believe in other ways of thinking and understanding the world. Noha mentions that this discrepancy often becomes clear in the writing process, and that it can also be overcome by certain experimental strategies of writing. In our interview, she states that,

“Yes, I do believe in all they’re saying fully, and I do believe in the presence of unseen foxes, but just to entertain the potential, and I think this appears in writing so well, and it is a process of unlearning and then experimenting with, okay, what happens when I literally change a word, or when I change a code, so, yeah, how do I include myself in the process and all of that, so I think this is a new way of also thinking about writing and about our own position in our writing and to what extent we allow ourselves to be affected and influenced by multispecies presences in our fields.” (ibid. 5:161f)

The way research experiences with more-than-human beings are written about can therefore invite readers to either fully think in the terms of the field, or to remain at a comfortable theoretical distance. Anand Vivek Taneja advocates in a similar vein to take religion seriously, stating that “[...] I think if we take religion seriously, as coherent discourse, it really allows us to [...] not encounter that resistance [...]” (Anand Vivek Taneja’s talk, Taneja 2022a, 11:329-332). To fully think in the way of research participants may allow the ethnographer to overcome the distance, resistance or reluctance to think differently. In our interview, Taneja talks about his own experience and his decision to “*take superstition seriously*” for reasons of overcoming epistemic violence,

“[...] I was taking superstition seriously and that’s because you know, [...] especially if there are working class people involved, or people who are not educated in the Western sense, it’s just dismissed as irrationality and superstition. So everything has to do with the intellectual formation of the person who is doing the ethnography.”
(Interview with Anand Vivek Taneja, Taneja 2022b, 4:116-123)

Taneja sees the reason for the reluctance to think differently in the intellectual training an ethnographer has enjoyed previously to their field experience. He laments that often this professional formation leads ethnographers to dismiss religious beliefs as superstition and irrationality. In this regard, he explains his own journey of realizing that not thinking in the way of the people he lives with during research, does not make much sense, even though he was trained not to do so. He recounts that,

“[...] My intellectual training was very much secular, humanist, do not believe in the supernatural, don’t take it seriously, focus only on human agency, and I think it was interesting to be in the graduate school in the US and be like, oh, okay, maybe there is another way of thinking about the world, thinking about ecology, [...] and it was interesting to go back to the field, to go back to Delhi, to go back to India [...] where people had all kinds of interactions with non-humans, animals and the supernatural, and it was really good [...] to now be in this world and not dismiss half of it, half of

these peoples' intellectual and spiritual world as some form of symbolism or allegory, and be like, well if they think these things are agentive, maybe I need to shift my ideas of what agency means in the world [...]"

(ibid. 10:314-323)

Certainly, there is a wide variety of definitions of “agency”, and Taneja’s personal experience with clashing epistemologies have led him to widen his own perspective on what “agency” means. It is, according to him, crucial to take up a wider perspective of agency, and include more-than-human beings as agents, because they often constitute important aspects of the research participant’s way of understanding the world. In regard to his own research, he mentions that a world with animals and other beings is a much fuller world,

“[...] If we are to take seriously [our research participants], they don’t live in a world of only human agency. They live in a world, where dreams are not just the Freudian unconscious, but often dreams from elsewhere, and the world is much richer and fuller, when animals and other non-humans are full participants of it”

(ibid.11:366-12:371)

Anand Vivek Taneja argues, that if “we were to take anthropology as a science seriously” then including non-human beings becomes crucial, since at its core is the experience of the human beings who are often interacting with non-humans. He laments that “our current ideas of scientific objectivity as being the measures of truth don’t yet have a way of figuring this out” (ibid. 4:125-5:132) and agrees with the idea that multispecies ethnography is an attempt to do so,

“[...] I would agree with people, that what multispecies ethnography, if as a label, is doing, is telling you that we are actually taking seriously people’s entangled humans, human entanglements with more-than-human worlds, and, not just thinking of them as symbolical or allegorical but actually taking them seriously [...]" (ibid. 6:195-7:200)

At the core of anthropological knowledge making is the human experience. In some cases, this experience is closely related to more-than-human beings. Multispecies ethnography comes with the premise of “taking seriously” those entanglements with and varying conceptualizations of more-than-human beings.

4.5 SUMMARY OF MULTISPECIES WAYS OF THINKING

The way to think about the more-than-human being in the field is characterized by an emphasis on entanglement, interactions, and relationality. While the scholars agreed on the fact that not all human and more-than-human relations are romantic, and some are even toxic,

an overtly rational approach to those relations is equally criticised for secularizing more-than-human relations. As elaborated in Taneja's work, the relation between humans and more-than-humans can be a spiritual one, which is not graspable through a purely scientific or romantic framework. Therefore, scientific rationality, secularity, and romanticism are opposed in favour of "taking seriously" various human perspectives and relations to the more-than-human.

5 SUMMARY OF KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE MULTISPECIES SPEAKER SERIES

Driven by my research interest in the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of multispecies ethnography, I participated in all four talks of the Multispecies Speakers Series and conducted semi-structured interviews with some of the speakers and organizers. Certain topics and aspects of multispecies ethnography seemed to be recurrent in the talks and interviews I held with multispecies scholars.

Particularly striking was the wide variety of more-than-human beings and non-human entities involved as agentic beings in ethnographic research. From rivers, water, landscapes, plants, animals, and stones to nuclear waste, aliens, symbolic animals, and the invisible – the scholars found coherent ways to research with and on those more-than-human participants. Multispecies ethnography, therefore, aims to include not only other species like plants and animals in research but expands towards a variety of more-than-human agentic beings, that do not necessarily fall under the classification of “species” – such as spirits and the unseen – to which a certain agency or animacy is equally ascribed.

To research on and with this wide variety of more-than-human agentic beings, the scholars of the Multispecies Speaker Series applied a series of established and innovative methods. Similar to “usual” ethnography, scholars of multispecies ethnography recognize the importance of embodied experience and sensory immersion in the field that go beyond language, as well as pre-linguistic experiences. Knowledge about a more-than-human research participant is not solely derived from an intellectual understanding but also from physically engaging with it through our senses. Multispecies scholars apply a deep multisensory immersion, using all senses to grasp their physical environment. A part from this sensory immersion, methods like participating in everyday life, documenting human discourses within a multi-actored research, observing more-than-human interactions, a follow-the-thing approach and imaginative ethnographic writing are applied regarding various, more-than-human participants. Through observation and interaction with the more-than-human, but in particular, the observation and in-depth understanding of human interactions and relations with more-than-humans, an understanding of a particular human perspective on a more-than-human being can be gained.

When it comes to understanding differing human perspectives on a more-than-human entity, language becomes a crucial aspect of the research process. Language plays a crucial role in ways of thinking and in knowledge-making-processes on the more-than-human. Just as most ethnographers, multispecies scholars are not exempted from the challenges that arise when

doing ethnographic fieldwork within the realm of multiple languages. Multispecies ethnography is situated at the intersections of different ways of sensing, knowing, and communicating, and thereby places importance on the translation between those ways of thinking and knowing. Most scholars uttered concerns and reflections about the use of language within the whole process of multispecies ethnographic knowledge-making, particularly in regard to epistemic hierarchies linked to the use of certain languages. Since the languages of the field might offer another way, and sometimes a much wider variety, of thinking about and with a more-than-human being, the use of local language in ethnographic writing can become a tool of resistance to neocolonial and epistemic violence in the field. However, it remains open to the researcher how to include linguistic tools from the field to describe multispecies relations and eventually translate them to their audiences. The terminology of “multispecies” ethnography itself was criticised by most scholars for being rooted in a secular-scientific dichotomy of human-nature-relations, and as such perpetuating epistemic violence. Regarding the study of non-humans, it remains important to ask which perspectives are prioritized and whose discourses are foregrounded and why.

The theoretical framework concerning more-than-human entities in the field emphasizes entanglement and relationality. Scholars acknowledge that not all human and more-than-human connections are romantic; some can even be detrimental. Critiques extend to an overly rational approach, as it tends to secularize these relations. Taneja’s research explores the possibility of a spiritual connection between humans and more-than-humans, transcending purely scientific or romantic frameworks. Thus, there is a rejection of scientific rationality, secularity, and romanticism in favor of genuinely considering diverse human perspectives and relationships with the more-than-human realm.

The importance of incorporating animals and other more-than-human entities into ethnographic research and writing has been highlighted through the Multispecies Speaker Series. Integrating these invisible and transcendent beings into ethnographic thought and writing poses a definite challenge, one that can be overcome through experimental ethnographic writing and creative vignettes. By exploring diverse realms of reality and adopting multiple perspectives through experimental writing, a richer comprehension and exploration of ethnographic contexts can be achieved.

Based on my understanding at the time of the possibilities and limitations of multispecies ethnography – I had not yet fully accepted the perspective that agentive beings remain an object-like status in multispecies ethnography – I decided to “test” the method by including what I then considered to be the most challenging aspect to ethnographically include as “a person” – a landscape. I could imagine ascribing some kind of “agency” to a volcano, while

also easily distinguish any possible anthropomorphism from the landscape itself, which would have been a more challenging endeavour during research with other animals, in particular with mammals. When it comes to do research “with“ animals as research participants, I found it challenging to differentiate between what might be my or other people’s human interpretations, evaluations, projections, and anthropomorphisms of certain animal behaviour, and which behaviour the animal actually exhibits. With plants, bacteria, fungi, and other agentive beings that are not mammals, my empathic imagination and the possibility to communicate with the being about reality and thereby making knowledge inclusively would reach its limitations even sooner. Therefore, I decided to take this to an extreme, and since I was also most intrigued by potentially doing ethnography with something as „unintelligible“ as a landscape, I conducted an experimental more-than-human ethnography with a volcano. I decided to spend the month of August 2022 near the recently active volcano “Tajogaite” of the volcanic ridge Cumbre Vieja on the Canary island of La Palma. Inspired by Kajri Jain’s approach to conducting multispecies ethnography by casually talking to park rangers (Kajri Jain’s discussion, Jain 2022: 11:334f), I had informal conversations with several volcano guards. Coming to the field with certain presumptions and a research bias, I allowed myself to be surprised by the sensory immersion in the field and the possibilities and limitations of conducting multispecies ethnography with a volcano. In the third part of this thesis, I depict my experimental ethnography with the volcano Tajogaite.

As the small inter-island airplane descends, the view from the plane window reveals a dark and charred landscape. The earth has an anthracite black colour with a subtle silver glimmer and even the streets, visible from above, seem to be constructed from the same substance, their black-silver tones mirroring the terrain of the island. After landing, all passengers disembark on the runway of the small airport, which also mirrors the anthracite shade of its surroundings. Light red orientation lines criss-cross the black tarmac, on which men in neon-orange high-visibility vests ensure the safety of the passengers. A fresh breeze carries the subtle scent and the unmistakable freshness of the nearby sea. It is a fragrant composition of the ocean's briny essence with a faint hint of sulphur, evoking the presence of a volcano. Exiting the airport, an immediate view of the nearby dark blue sea unfolds, its vast presence separated only by brusque anthracite rocks. The proximity to the Atlantic Ocean engendered a constant gusty wind. As I awaited the bus heading to the capital, Santa Cruz, an irresistible urge compelled me to reach out and touch the ancient coarse ash that comprised the ground near the station, a first tactile connection to the geological history of La Palma.

(Fieldnotes I: 14)

PART III – AN EXPERIMENTAL MORE-THAN-HUMAN ETHNOGRAPHY WITH A VOLCANO

Taking a local bus from the capital to Los Llanos, where I'm going to reside for the next month, we pass through the central mountain range of the island via a tunnel. Upon emerging on the other side, a different climate presents itself, with more sun and drier vegetation than the humid east side of the island. At some point, the bus leans in a large curve, and as it slowly turns, the Tajogaite suddenly reveals itself before my eyes. Overwhelmed, I twist my whole body in the seat to get a better look at what initially seemed like a hill with a small cloud of smoke coming from its top. The sight of the volcano is overwhelming. It seems like a giant monster. After a few moments of excitement, I realize that the other passengers on the bus don't share these sensations with me, as they are completely ignoring the sight of the volcano and behave more appropriately for a daily bus journey between towns. On this side of the island, there are many banana plantations and houses with what resemble private gardens. Many individual houses cover the area, and a mega-tongue of lava devoured everything in its way. It hurts to see this huge destruction and the apparent insignificance of everything in the "eyes" of the volcano.

(Fieldnotes I: 16f)

the Tajogaite

From September 2021 to December 2021, the inhabitants of La Palma witnessed the longest recorded eruption, completely destroying several villages and partially burying them under 70 meters of lava. Many people lost everything they had, their homes, gardens, cars, plantations, shops, restaurants, cafes, churches, and cemeteries. Driven by my initial understanding of multispecies ethnography, I decided to conduct field research on the island of La Palma regarding this volcanic eruption in order to test the method based on the relationship between the people and a landscape.

Isabela, a very energetic, extroverted, and often laughing woman in her fifties, rents out the former bedrooms of her two adult sons in a central apartment in Los Llanos, preferably to working adults through the housing platform “idealista.com”. Since she assured me over the phone several weeks ago that the region around Los Llanos was safe again and the volcano had long been calm, I mention it again after her initial introduction to the peculiarities of the apartment. Surprisingly, she hasn’t even visited the very nearby solidified and cooled-down lava flow yet. Isabella used to know the neighbouring town very well and can recall the streets, every store, every corner, and of course, the neighbours. She says that she hasn’t felt able to go there and see the huge devastation, and I can see how upset and sad she suddenly seems, understanding that it would hurt too much to go there. I won’t say much more than “I’m really sorry”, and retreat to my room to digest those emotions for a while, while Isabela leaves to celebrate with her friends who have just rang the doorbell. The carnival has been moved from February to August “due to the pandemic and the volcano.”

(Fieldnotes I: 15f)

pain and grief

In the face of omnipresent disturbing feelings of pain and grief, it didn’t take long until I began to severely doubt my intentions. What am I doing here at a site of natural disaster, immense devastation, and human tragedy? How could I ever think of doing research with people tragically affected by a volcano eruption, using their terrible situation to quench my curiosity, and trying to obtain an academic degree with it? I felt ashamed of my frivolous and insensitive thoughtlessness, and wondered whether there was an ethically acceptable way to approach potential research participants and find out more about their relation to the volcano.

I woke up a bit later than usual and pass by the kitchen on my way to the bathroom, where an elderly woman is sitting at the table, holding a small, fluffy dog on her lap. Standing next to the woman, Isabela notices me passing by and exclaims, “Good morning, Philo! Look, my mother came for a visit!”. I abruptly stop, and Isabela introduces me to her 80-year-old mother and the little dog, which she lifts from her mother’s hands so that I could pet it. “How cute!” I say, introducing myself to her mother and spending some time petting the dog. After a while, Isabela says, “Yes, the little dog is doing well, she’s taking care of Mom, who hasn’t been feeling so good lately, right, Mom? You’ve been feeling sad these days.” Her mother doesn’t answer anything.

(Fieldnotes II: 6)

mission aborted

Throughout my research on La Palma, feelings of pain and grief were pervasive. In a brief encounter with my landlord’s mother, I felt a genuine curiosity about her sadness and its potential connection to the volcano. However, it pained me to witness the profound sorrow of such a fragile elderly woman. I didn’t feel equipped to provide her with support and hesitated to delve deeper into the subject due to a lack of trust between us at that moment. I believed it would be more tactful to refrain from immediate discussion, fearing it might be insensitive. Yet, I later regretted not continuing the conversation further. As my doubts about the feasibility of the research project grew, I decided to abandon my research project on La Palma altogether. With remaining tasks such as conducting online interviews and transcribing recordings, I planned to dedicate the remainder of my stay to those activities, thereby avoiding the potential re-traumatization of individuals who might be affected. Instead of pursuing my initial inquiries, I spent time in coffee houses, on the market, and in a fitness centre, joined public festivities like the delayed carnival and a car race and talked to my host and neighbours about possible hikes around Los Llanos. After a few days, I decided to rent a moped to explore the island.

In the morning, as I ride through the streets near Los Llanos, the air is cool, but the sun is shining. Surely that's why I've been getting sunburned in recent days. Already accustomed to the vibrant sound of the motorcycle engine and its peculiarities in navigation, I ride up a winding street and enjoy discovering something new after each curve. Suddenly, I am reaching a curve from which another street made of black sand emerges. I brake and slow down, realizing that there are houses halfway destroyed by the lava just next to the road. I turn to get back to the black sandy street. There are men in high-visibility vests and helmets at the entrance of the street, and further up, a small wooden hut stands surrounded by more men in high-visibility vests. I stop by their side and observe the situation for some time. A car from the federal highway arrives, and the men let it pass. Another seemingly private car arrives, and the men let it pass. A third car arrives, and it passes. I decide to try it as well. I approach the ash-covered, inclined street and drive it up-hill. The moped struggles with the ashes and the inclination of the street, moving unreliably. As I reach the top of the inclined part, I halt to calm down, and incidently stop right in front of two men in safety vests who stand next to the hut. Unsure whether I just did something illegal or not, I open my helmet and ask whether it is allowed to drive here with a moped. They tell me that I am allowed to pass this street by moped, but advise me to be careful and go slowly. I feel a certain adrenaline rush, as I haven't expected to cross lava on a rented motorcycle today. The street, although recently prepared by some construction vehicles, is far from smooth. Between the slippery ash sands and the larger, thicker rocks of lava that deflect my moped, the entire journey of ascents, curves, and descents is a challenge. In addition to signs that say "no stopping", there are also several indications of "hot zones". It's both fascinating and a bit scary to pass through these zones, as I can feel the heat of the lava on my body. Suddenly, it feels like being in a desert at 50 degrees Celsius. For a moment, I'm afraid that the moped tires might explode from the heat. The landscape around me is now completely black. There are varying formations of black rocks, while the radiant blue sea seems to be far in the distance. I have to concentrate a lot on navigating the vehicle and to maintain balance, but occasionally, I glance around in an infinite landscape of black rocks. In some parts, they still look liquid due to their smooth shapes, but in others, the rocks are very sharp and crispy. Finally, I reach the end of the rocky lava street. Looking for a place to park the motorcycle and to calm down, I arrive at a viewpoint made from asphalt where other people have already stopped to observe the catastrophic extent of the lava flow.

(Fieldnotes I: 24f)

After my initial doubts about the ethical feasibility of this research project, I borrowed a moped and took day trips to different regions to get to know the island better. It wasn't possible to circumnavigate the island in one day on the moped without freezing after sunset, but it would have been possible with a car. During my trips, I visited older and newer volcanoes, and volcanic craters, felt the different climatic zones with colder, more humid, or pleasantly warm air while driving on the moped, and got to know various areas of the island. While the centre of the island is a large nature reserve, the eastern slopes are populated with small picturesque towns and villages, farmhouses, and holiday homes, amidst diverse and lush vegetation. In the north, I frequently encountered herds of goats on the road, and the southwestern side of the island is covered by banana plantations. During my trips, I recalled a participant of the Multispecies Speaker Series who shared his methodological approach to multispecies ethnography through walking, and thereby encountering animals and plants in the forest (Derek in Kajri Jain's discussion, Jain 2022: 3:55f). Delighted by this newly found parallel to my exploration through moped driving, I decided to continue discovering the island. After a few days, a road was opened to public traffic over the cooling lava tongue of the last eruption. Until then, it had been prepared by construction vehicles and had been accessible only to them. The new road, made of flattened lava, represented a significant restoration of the previously interrupted north-south connection on the western side of the island. Many commuters had endured an additional hour of detour to reach the largest city in the country, Los Llanos, from the southern tip of the island. It also connected the formerly cut off part of the street to a frequently visited lookout point, from which it was easy to get a close perspective on the devastating expansion of the lava flows.

I park my motorcycle next to the lookout point, open the seat, and sit down with a yogurt that I stored in the seat and which has turned by now somewhat lukewarm. The lookout point is a small circular platform surrounded by a metal fence. From this vantage point, one can witness a clear view of the massive lava flow and its indiscriminate destruction of homes, plantations, pools, and roads. After a few minutes, a van arrives at the lookout point. Two boys, aged between 10 and 15, along with their mother and grandmother, step out of the van. The grandmother takes her time getting out of the car, clutching a small towel in her hand, slowly making her way towards the fence. "Do you see that farm over there?," she turns to the boys who have already climbed onto the fence, marvelling at the landscape, "it used to belong to my brother." She starts crying heartbreakingly. She then slowly moves to gaze at the other side of the platform while the mother captures a photograph of the boys, posing and smiling in front of the fence at the lookout point, with the lava in the background. Afterward, she tells her mother, "Come on, let's go," and they all return to the car. They didn't stay here for even two minutes, but the pain of the elderly woman stayed with me.

(Fieldnotes I: 24f)

perspectives

During my research, I encountered various ways of dealing with the volcanic eruption. On the one hand, there were deeply affected residents who at times couldn't speak about their traumatic experiences or chose not to engage with them, like my landlady. On the other hand, as I embarked on exploration trips on my moped, I also observed mostly Spanish-speaking tourists and engaged in conversations with visitors from other Canary Islands and the Spanish mainland who enthusiastically travelled to La Palma to witness the remains of the latest eruption. Places, where those different perspectives or attitudes could be observed were the lookout points, located near the incredibly wide lava flow that cascaded and solidified from the island's ridge down to the sea. In the face of the ever-present pain, I refrained from speaking with affected people about their experiences. However, I increasingly encountered different perspectives and emotional relations to the volcano.

Driven by curiosity, I continue to ascend narrow streets after crossing the lava flow. One of these streets abruptly ends in black sand, swallowed by a mountain of ash that obstructs its path. On the left side, houses still stand, untouched by the lava flow but completely cloaked in ash. Just before the massive heap of ash, there is a small wooden house and a red and white painted barricade blocking the street. A young man wearing an orange safety vest paces back and forth. Intrigued, I approach the little house and park my vehicle about ten meters away.

Disembarking from my moped, I approach him to ask for directions. The weather is sunny with warm temperatures. Up close, I notice tiny droplets of sweat glistening on his cheeks. Dressed in long jeans, a T-shirt under his safety vest, a cap, and black sunglasses, he openly and friendly engages in a little small-talk with me. His face bears a thick layer of sunscreen. Throughout our conversation, I discover that Gustavo is a volcano guard. When not stationed at the volcano, he usually studies English and Tourism in Tenerife. He says that he enjoys interacting with people and jokingly adds, "that's why they assigned me here." While our conversation deepens, he shows me a small gas measuring device lying on a rock next to the hut. At some point, his demonstration gets interrupted by a message reaching his walkie-talkie attached to his vest. "One motorcycle has just arrived," he responds to the voice on the other end. Gustavo comments me that they also keep track of the people who ascend to the volcano. Apparently, today only 19 people have come up, but the number can vary greatly, and on some days it reaches as high as 150 or 300. Since many ascending people are German, according to Gustavo, he points to an area on the island inhabited mostly by Germans to explain that fact. For a moment, I find it amusing how he uses the singular form saying, "por allá vive mucho alemán," and gestures as if he was referring to a type of plant. He then goes on to explain that initially, the task of the Gesplan team was only to clean the streets and the houses from the ashes using snowplow vehicles. However, nowadays, their tasks have changed, since they are also regulated by the Environmental Department, which has employed around a thousand people from Gesplan since the eruption. As we talk about the newly established road over the cooled-down lava stream, we get interrupted by another man stepping out of a white Jeep with the words "Environmental Agents" (orig. agentes medio ambiente) printed on it. The sporty man, of about 40 years, who just parked the Jeep next to the little house, wears sunglasses, beige pants and a burgundy polo shirt adorned with sewn-in logos that I cannot identify from a distance. He shortly asks, "Everything alright?" Gustavo seemingly routinely replies, "Yes, everything is calm. Are you going back?" The man responds, "Yes, I'll continue then," and gets back into the car, driving down the street.

(Fieldnotes I: 25f)

During my explorations on the moped, I found myself gradually uncovering a network of small streets surrounding Tajogaite. These hidden pathways, veiled from the casual observer, often culminated in the presence of a barrier, a wooden cottage, or a simple box strategically placed near trails and lookout points. In my quest to understand the complexities of this volcanic landscape and the human relations and connotations to it, I returned to these places, hoping to reunite with Gustavo, the affable guardian who possessed an inherent inclination for engaging in heartfelt conversations. Regrettably, our paths did not intersect anymore. Instead, a rotation of different guards occupied the posts during subsequent visits. Even in other cottages, the personnel seemed to change on a daily basis. The majority of these guards, who seemed to have a lot of time to chat, greeted me warmly. They shared their knowledge and experiences generously, allowing me to collect a trove of narratives and information, meticulously transcribing their insights into my fieldnotes. Opting for an informal approach, I refrained from recording our conversations, instead relying on immediate recollection to capture the essence of our exchanges. While a more structured interview format would have provided valuable depth, the nature of their schedules and the primacy of their responsibilities as guardians precluded such arrangements. Within the realm of our discourse, I occasionally divulged my research objectives, emphasizing my genuine interest in their perspectives on the volcano. At times, however, I chose to present myself as a humble tourist or avid hiker, obscuring my true intentions. By concealing the full extent of my inquiries, I hoped to maintain a delicate balance between unearthing their authentic narratives and respecting their professional obligations. These encounters with the guards became a source of profound excitement during my ethnographic endeavour. They provided me with a renewed sense of purpose, as each new conversation added another layer of understanding to the complex tapestry of the volcano's human dimensions. With each anecdote shared, I immersed myself further into the intricate web of their experiences, delicately unravelling the intertwined threads of resilience, reverence, and profound connection to the volcanic realm.

In the pursuit of comprehending the multifaceted nature of the volcano's guardians, I meticulously curated their stories and insights, capturing the ebb and flow of their perspectives. Their fluctuating presence and the ephemeral nature of our encounters compelled me to document these accounts with utmost care, preserving the essence of their voices within my ethnographic research.

As I ride my motorcycle up another winding street on the other side of the volcano, I realize that I should have dressed more appropriately. Gradually, the weather begins to change. Suddenly, strong winds pick up, and dark gray clouds appear in the sky. Entering a pine forest, the fog hinders my visibility, limiting my sight to a short distance ahead. In a foggy curve within the forest, I notice the faint outlines of a small wooden cottage from afar. It has the same appearance as the houses of the volcano guards, but the moisture has darkened the wood, saturating it with dampness. Just as I approach a few meters from the cottage, a woman comes out of the house. She takes a few steps towards the street and motions me to stop. I apply the brakes and stop the moped right beside her. Opening the visor of my helmet, I feel gentle raindrops on my skin. "Are you heading up the trail?" she asked. "Yes," I replied, to not complicate the conversation in the middle of the road. "Well, don't go. It's closed. A storm is coming." Meanwhile, the rain intensifies, prompting me to turn my motorcycle around to head back. I acknowledge the woman, saying, "Alright." She instructs me to park and come inside the house, indicating a small spot next to another red moped, partially sheltered from the rain by the cottage's small awning. Delighted to receive such a kind invitation when I need it most, I promptly comply, expressing my gratitude. As I park, she has already sought refuge from the rain inside the guardhouse. I hurriedly follow suit, closing the door just in time to prevent it from being blown open by a gust of wind. Inside the cottage, there are two white plastic chairs and a table in the centre. A bundle of large water bottles stands on the floor. I take a seat in the other chair and curiously survey the contents of this hut. On the table, there are a few lists, a walkie-talkie, and a paper map of the island, similar to the one I have seen at the tourist centre in Los Llanos. The woman wears pants, sturdy footwear, and a sweater underneath her orange reflective vest, and a hood over her tied-up hair. The loud noise of rain falling on the roof of the cottage fills the air. Sitting on the other chair, the woman first gazes through the large opening of the hut for a few minutes before engrossing in her mobile phone, on which I catch a glimpse of a photo of two girls. As the rain gradually subsides, she inquires if I have intended to hike the trail alone. "Yes," I respond, to which she advises against it. "Hiking is always better with someone else. The weather here changes rapidly, and it can be very dangerous." - "Alright, you're right," I replied, feeling a sense of remorse for my initial intentions, even though they were not my real intentions. Just as she begins engaging in a casual conversation about her daughters and their father, she interrupts herself saying, "Oh, look, it's clearing up already." She stands up, signalling for us to leave. I follow her, and we head towards the parked vehicles. Her car was

parked nearby, and she remarks, „Look how dirty it is again from the ashes, even though I just washed it yesterday!” - “That’s unbelievable,” I exclaimed. “Well then, take care,” she says. - „Thank you so much,” I reply, hopping onto my motorcycle after wiping off the water from the seat.

(Fieldnotes II: 19f)

care in the face of devastation

The volcano guards had several tasks. They had to measure the gases in their cottages using a small device, smaller than their walkie-talkie, and provide information to interested individuals about the volcano and the possibilities of hiking in the area. Additionally, they were responsible for counting the number of people and ideally recording the nationalities of those who made their way up to their cottages. This, I guessed, could potentially serve as a study to determine potential future uses of the volcano as a tourist attraction. Their duties included picking up groups of tourists in case gas levels rose, and protecting hikers from bad weather. Moreover, it seemed to me that, at times, their work went beyond the task of informing and protecting people who ascend to the end of the street. Gustavo had told me that a German man who had lost everything had once brought him beer, but since he didn’t drink alcohol, the same man had returned another day to bring him a cold Coca-Cola. Another woman from the village who had lost her house used to regularly bring him food, and a man whom Gustavo referred to as “the lucky man,” whose house had been just next to the lava in the uninhabitable zone, had brought him champagne from his last year’s wine harvest from his vineyard that had been consumed by the lava. It seemed to me that the guards practised some kind of care work for affected people as well. Besides protecting people from the volcano, they were also tasked with protecting the volcano from the people.

By chance, I stumble upon another small wooden cottage, nestled near the peak of Tajogaite, next to the forest. I park my moped about a hundred meters away from the house. Just as I approach the wooden cottage to inquire about the path, a man in his forties emerges, wielding a wooden broom. The tall and slender guard wears a cap on his head, a dental brace, and a piercing on the upper part of his left ear. We engage in a lively and lengthy conversation about Tajogaite, during which he shares various stories about affected individuals, state support, fortune, and tourism. As I begin to struggle with retaining all the details in my memory, I conclude the conversation and return to my motorcycle to continue riding towards the next bend. From a distance, perched on a rock and jotting down my notes, I can still see the guard erasing the traces left by the previous group of tourists in the ash outside the designated trail, ensuring that “it remains as the volcano has left it.”

(Fieldnotes II: 25)

natural beauty

Reflecting on the activities of the guards and my encounters with them, I noticed a certain incongruity between their perspectives on the catastrophe, their political stance regarding it, and their tasks, which seemed primarily dedicated to the touristic use of the eruption. Cleaning the ashes near the volcano's peak to give it a “natural” appearance, counting people and nationalities, monitoring gases in hiking areas, and informing people about potential weather-related risks on the trails could serve the purpose of managing and enhancing current and future tourist visits to the island. However, there are certain risks that come with exploiting the volcano as a tourist attraction. An around 50-year old guard once narrated how, a few months ago, during the eruption, the smell of “rotten eggs” was so strong that people in the villages nearby hadn't even been able to sleep. Due to the winds, the gases, as well as the ashes, had reached the valleys of Los Llanos and the entire island. At times, the ashes had spread until the airport, which had had to be closed several times for a few days (Fieldnotes II:26). According to the guard, the volcanic gases could cause headaches and fainting, and during some volcano tours during Holy Week, it had happened several times that the Gesplan staff had to pick up tour participants because the gas levels had been too high and some people had fainted. (II:25,26). He then went on explaining me on a paper map the best hiking trails around his guarding hut. He told me, that a few days ago, an „expert“ had visited him and had declared that „it is a very special volcano“, because he and his team had been able to

measure seven different gases coming out of the Tajogaite. The guard opined that *“the volcano should be utilized more for tourism”* and that La Palma should aspire to a tourism *“like in Lanzarote, where people come just to see special types of volcanoes”* (II:22,24). He then recommended me to join an organized tour that took a trail to get closer to the crater and immediately mentioned two companies that used to organize such guided tours. He showed me pictures of the trail and the crater, and said that *“these are groups of 14 people who go on a trail towards the crater of the new volcano on paths like this,”* pointing to a path that started next to the house and went over the ashes, marked on both sides by anthracite rocks. Upon closer inspection, one could observe that outside of the path marked with stones, the edges of the path were meticulously swept to preserve the “natural” appearance of the ash surrounding it. Contrary to this optimistic stance toward tourism, some guards occasionally held opinions and positions that contradicted this objective.

After talking about experiences of those affected by the eruption, Jorge's expression suddenly turns more angered, and his gestures become more vigorous. "And then there are people from outside who come and ask us, 'Why do you have farms here if it's known that there will be eruptions in this area' - 'Well, you see, we have them because the generations before us built them, and you never know where and when an eruption will occur,'" he explains. He expresses his frustration with tourists who come to hike in this area and disregard the guidelines, saying, "Instead of respecting the people, they step off the designated trail because they don't understand."

(Fieldnotes II: 28)

tourism

Sometimes tourists seemed insensitive to me when they enthusiastically discussed the volcanic eruption. In a café, I struck up a conversation with Javier from Madrid and Miguel from La Gomera. Without prompt, they eagerly shared their extensive knowledge about volcanic eruptions, rock formation, and tectonic plates. Javier had visited Miguel, and together they flew to La Palma to witness the volcano. According to them, it was *"the best thing that could have happened to this island"* because if an eruption had not occurred here, there would have been prolonged seismic activity and the possibility of a tsunami due to the interaction of tectonic plates and a lava tunnel that would have otherwise emerged on the other side of the Atlantic. When lava enters the cold seawater too quickly, it forms hexagonal columns, according to Javier, similar to those found in Iceland. He showed me a photo of lava in hexagonal shapes, which is indeed fascinating. After a while of conversing with Javier and Miguel, their enthusiasm for volcanos and volcanic activity on our planet infected me, and I could understand better why one would come to visit the volcano despite its catastrophic effects on the inhabitants who have lost all of their belongings. On other days, I observed couples happily taking photos of the lava, posing in funny positions, a group of tourists near the street entrance, fascinated by the lava, and three adults who exited a car with a *"Tenerife"* logo printed on it, remarking at one of the lookout points, *"Well, you can't see much from here"* and *"It's not as impressive as expected"* (Fieldnotes I: 25). Treating the volcano as a tourist attraction was received controversially among the volcano guards.

A small group of interested individuals is forming for the tour to the volcanic tube of the Caños de Fuego from 1949. There is a Spanish-speaking couple with a child of approximately 4 years old, a Czech-speaking couple in their twenties, and myself. Before entering the cave, we watch a 5-minute video about the eruption of the San Juan volcano in 1949. It starts with the story of a shepherd who noticed the earthquake and the first sounds of the eruption. Three days later, the eruption occurred. The guide, who speaks English first and then Spanish, is around 25 years old, wearing a shirt and shorts, and thick glasses. He tells us about two different types of lava that can be observed in this area – the “A-A” which is sharp when touched, and the “pa-chui-chui” which looks smooth and liquid-like. “The appearance of the lava depends largely on the temperature when it reaches the surface and the speed at which it cools,” he says. Inside the volcanic tube, which looks like a cave, he tells us that this cave is about 100 meters long, but the recent eruption on the island formed a tube of about 500 meters, and the longest in the world is around 18 kilometers. After the tour, he allows us to touch the different forms of lava inside and outside of the cave. I ask him about the names “A-A” and “pa-chui-chui,” and he tells me that they are Hawaiian words.

(Fieldnotes II: 9f)

the museum

Close to the Tajogaite area, the Center of the Volcanic Cavities called *Caños de Fuego* showcases and documents lava tubes formed during the eruption of the San Juan volcano in 1949. As displayed on the website, it offers various features such as a central exhibition area displaying visual representations of lava and volcanic tube formations, an audiovisual screening room, guided tours of the volcanic tube known as the “glass cave,” a souvenir shop, a panoramic viewpoint, and a cafeteria (URL#5). In addition to their exhibition on the 1949 lava tubes, the centre has recently added two panels focusing on the 2021 eruption and the new tubes. The first panel, titled “*A New Volcano in Neopalma*,” provides an overview of the scale of the latest eruption. It explains that the volcanic growth in La Palma has occurred from the older and inactive north towards the younger and currently active south, referred to as Paleopalma and Neopalma, respectively. The Cumbre Vieja ridge, located in Neopalma, has been the site of all historical eruptions, including the 2021 eruption in the northern part of the ridge. As written on the newly added panels, The eruption featured multiple vents (up to 22) and successive craters (6 in total), which facilitated the rapid expansion of lava flows in a fan

shape, covering an area of 12.2 km². Due to the impact and threat to populated areas, 7,000 people were evacuated. The lava flows were active in different regions, sequentially moving from the south to the center, then to the north, and back to the south of the lava field. The lava also reached the ocean at two points, creating “low islands” that expanded the land area by 48 hectares. The remarkable volcanic structure, standing 200m tall, with craters spanning 557m in a northwest alignment, lava flows extending 6.5km in length, reaching thicknesses of up to 90m (with an average of 12m), and the emission of 200 million m³ of pyroclasts have significantly transformed the landscape of that particular area of the “Beautiful Island.”

“No, no, no, let’s do the last four tacts again, please”, Juan request through his microphone standing infront of his experimental rock band, “I missed my entry again, sorry.” Before they start to play again, Alicia, slightly annoyed by having to repeat the same part for the fourth time quickly instructs, “Manuel, you need to play a little louder, I can’t hear you at all.” Her drumming has been already almost perfect. This time though, she messes it up completely, as the extreme volume of Manuel’s guitar now irritates everyone and creates chaos. Juan reacts to the sudden loud noise by pushing away the microphone, which is now producing an uncomfortably high pitch sound. Kiki drops parts of her expensive percussion set and then hastily looks for it on the floor. After some moments of chaos and stress, they decide to try again. Several following attempts later, the band eases into a harmonic play and increasingly calms down collectively while playing. The new song now almost works out, but just when Juan is about to instruct to play it one more time, his mother comes in running and screaming in panic, “Have you not heard the explosion?,” putting everyone in an immediate state of high alert. “The volcano exploded!” she exclaims striking fear among the youngsters, “Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go!” Hectically, Juan, Kiki, Manuel and Alicia grab some instruments and follow Juan’s mother running out of their house, getting into her car to escape from the eruption.

(Experimental vignette; Fieldnotes I: 27)

the explosion

Answering to my question, one of the guards told me that perhaps he did know someone personally affected, but he was not sure. *“A group of friends had a music rehearsal precisely in a house under the volcano, and they didn’t hear the explosion. The mother of the guitarist came running to them and said, ‘Didn’t you hear that explosion?’ They quickly grabbed some of their belongings and ran away. Now there is up to 70 meters of lava covering their house”,* the guard told me (Fieldnotes I:27). After the eruption, many people moved to hotels and temporary accommodations. Some people were taken in by others on the island taking care of them, and others had to leave the island because they *“had nothing left here,”* as told by a family known to the guard. *“They lost five houses and a garden, and they moved to Tenerife because they had relatives there”* (ibid.). Through my conversation with the guards, I uncovered some more stories of affected people.

Saturday morning. In the main square of Los Llanos, there is a fair – The Gastronomic Gathering of Puertos Naos. Puertos Naos is a village not affected by the lava stream, but completely inhabitable due to volcanic gases. There are six gastronomic stands from bars, restaruants, and the „German bakery“ (oirg. panadería alemana) from the village selling their goods, drinks and food, and the square where the fair takes place is crowded by visitors.

(Fieldnotes II:9a, I:16, I:31)

housing and dispossession

The volcano guards recounted various stories to me about people affected by the eruption. Miguel shared a tale of a 70-year-old German woman who owned a house in Puerto de los Naos, where a volcanic tube still emitted dangerous gases. She wouldn't be allowed to return to her home for the next ten years due to the gas issue, not even for a brief visit. The guard informed me that the Spanish government had deemed the area uninhabitable, and in other regions, the "new land" formed by cooled lava remained under Spanish state ownership. *"Many people who theoretically could return to their homes to repair them are not allowed to do so,"* he explained. Miguel also recounted an incident where he and another guard had to pursue a woman through the cooled lava flow. She had owned a house there, nearly entirely engulfed by lava. His colleague had managed to capture her, but to follow her, he had had to walk over the lava and touch sharp rocks, which caused bloody wounds on his hands because this type of lava was very rough. When he finally grasped the woman's hand, she clung tightly to him. *"The poor thing wasn't doing well,"* Miguel added sympathetically, acknowledging her distress. *"Well, let's put ourselves in her shoes"* he continued, emphasizing that while guards enforced restrictions, they were *„also human."* (Fieldnotes I:28) This notion had already occurred to me when Gustavo shared a story about a cemetery almost entirely covered by lava. Since *„people here care a lot about their ancestors"*, according to Gustavo, some had tried to enter the cemetery anyway, despite its limited accessibility and an official prohibition to enter the area of the lava. Gustavo's response to such attempts was compassionate. *"When we see someone jumping over, we say something, but if we see the person crying"* – he raised his hands in a gesture of innocence and turned around, looking in other directions – *"there is no one here"*. Gustavo narrated that since people had not been allowed to enter the cemetery, a helicopter had once dropped flowers from the air onto the cemetery, and he had found that gesture very beautiful. So did I. (Fieldnotes I:32-33) Another

guard recounted that in a nearby village, a small chapel had hosted masses for luck. Reflecting on the arbitrary nature of misfortune, he remarked, „*Now the same thing that happened to Tenerife at another time is happening to us*” (Fieldnotes II:28). He mentioned an octogenarian who had witnessed the eruptions of 1949, 1971, and 2021. Another man had lost a winery, two houses, and nine tourist apartments, and after the eruption only had his mother-in-law’s house, and another more remote one in Fuencaliente, where he had moved in after the eruption. (Fieldnotes II:22) A guard told me that many people, prior to the eruption, had owned houses larger than officially stated, so they were receiving less financial support from the government afterwards (Fieldnotes II:23). However, many people hadn’t received any money at all, according to the guard, even though they were eligible for receiving financial support. Miguel expressed frustration with governmental decisions, particularly regarding expropriation, and lamented the plight of the former inhabitants of Puertos Naos, unable to return home for years. „*There is a lot of expropriation happening*” (ibid.), he states, mentioning many displaced individuals still residing in hotels six months after the eruption. Temporary wooden houses had been built for some people in El Paso and Los Llanos, but it was, according to Miguel, unbearable for them having to “*live like dogs*” (ibid.) after having lived with all the space they had had before.

It is 2:41 in the morning. I wake up in my bed in Isabel's apartment. Lying on my bed, I sense a rhythmic movement in my surroundings, its intensity rising and falling in waves. I turn on the light to see if any objects are moving, but neither the lamp nor my water glass show any visible signs of movement. But the water inside the glass does. Excitement courses through me as I am experiencing an earthquake for the first time in my life, but soon worry starts to creep in as well. What would I do if there was another eruption? Restless, I search for information about current earthquakes on the internet and discover that one has been recorded with its epicentre in the neighbouring town El Paso at this hour. The following day, I mention to a volcano guard that I have felt an earthquake, and he calms me down saying, "Yes, these can still be felt, but they are no longer reported in the news."

(Fieldnotes II: 12)

ashes and earthquakes

The volcano's ash is scattered everywhere in this part of the island. It rests on the roofs and terraces of houses, beside the streets, atop paths, tables, and chairs, in every crevice. Even far away from Tajogaite, the anthracite dust can be found hidden in every unscraped centimetre. Sweeping has become a daily routine for many people affected by the ash, and construction workers still have a lot of work cleaning the villages of the residue. Closer to the peak of Tajogaite, where hills of ash meet the forest, its anthracite colour and smooth surface contrast with the fresh, vibrant green of the pine trees and the deep blue of the sea in the background. Gentle gusts of wind blend the distinctive etheric oils of the pines with the salty air of the sea and the volcanic gases emitted by Tajogaite. From the highest point of the island, overlooking all its parts and its volcanic structure, its inseparable existence from volcanic activity becomes graspable. Without the eruptions of the past millions of years, it would be impossible to set foot on this land in the middle of the Atlantic. Without the planet's volcanic activity, breathing the air and having an atmosphere would not be possible either.

SUMMARY OF AN EXPERIMENTAL MORE-THAN-HUMAN ETHNOGRAPHY

During my one-month stay on La Palma, I experimented with multispecies perspectives and conducted preliminary ethnographic research around the volcano of the recent eruption in Cumbre Vieja – Tajogaite. After my initial enthusiasm for my experimental project, I found myself questioning the ethics of conducting research in a place of natural catastrophe with people who may be in a psychologically altered state. By chance, I encountered another group of individuals – the volcano guards – who served as ideal interlocutors for my exploratory research. Given their primary task of informing people and their availability for leisurely conversations, engaging in informal discussions with both the guards and island visitors revealed different ways of relating to the volcano and various perspectives on its future use for volcano tourism, as well as on the expropriation of affected individuals and the acquisition of “new land” by the Spanish state. The guards shared stories and anecdotes about people who lost their homes due to the eruption. While some had support systems in place, many had to relocate to caravans and temporary housing, living in poor conditions. As the new land created by the cooling lava flow was declared the property of the Spanish state, affected inhabitants were simultaneously dispossessed. The tasks of the guards was not only served to protect people from the volcano but also to protect the area from people, and thereby maintain a “natural” appearance of the remains of the catastrophic explosion. Different perspectives emerged among the guards regarding the increase in tourism in the area. The tourists I spoke with seemed primarily fascinated by the volcano, giving less importance to the affected inhabitants of La Palma. The government decided to provide financial aid to the victims along with psychological support, but many people did not receive it due to a lack of official documentation.

Taking these various perspectives on the volcano seriously, from a monstrous force to a fascinating natural spectacle, from an unpredictable destructive power to a new tourist attraction, appears essential for understanding conflicting approaches. Inspired by the experimental research methods discussed in the multispecies speaker series, I immersed myself in sensory experiences in the field, aiming to portray the perspectives of my research participants through vignettes and experimental ethnographic writing. Focusing on the care-taking work of the guards – establishing the state’s presence – shed light on the intricate dynamics between humans, the volcano, and the impacts of government decisions. These multifaceted perspectives offer a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between natural disasters, human experiences, and the intricate tapestry of power structures within the socio-cultural fabric of the island, and present an ideal entry point for further research.

INSIGHTS FROM AN EXPERIMENTAL MORE-THAN-HUMAN ETHNOGRAPHY WITH THE VOLCANO TAJOGAITE

Driven by my research interest in the methodology of multispecies ethnography, I decided to conduct an experimental, preliminary multispecies ethnography with the recently originated volcano Tajogaite on La Palma. Upon arrival, I soon realized that feelings of pain and grief were omnipresent among the inhabitants of La Palma, which lead me to reconsider the ethical feasibility of my research endeavour. After some time, I found a way to ethically engage in conversations with people less affected by the eruption – the volcano guards. The interactions with the volcano guards became my newly found purpose and their insights on the relation between the inhabitants of La Palma and the volcano Tajogaite greatly contributed to my understanding of these more-than-human relations. What struck me in particular, were the different perspectives on the volcano present in the field. Through informal, casual conversations with tourists coming from other Canary Islands, and the observation and vicarious participation in grieving processes, I realized that the volcano presents very different things to different people. While for many inhabitants the Tajogaite is comparable to a catastrophically huge monster, heartlessly destroying everything its way – streets, houses, churches, cementeries, and whole towns – others approached the geological curiosity with delighted euphoria as a site of tourist attraction, or rationally as a geological generation process of new national territory. The volcano guards, a part from knowing of many stories of affected people, also operated at the intersections of care and environmental protection, by being there for former house, land, and vineyard owners who revisited the site of catastrophe and who seemingly found support in talking with the guards, bringing them gifts like champagne made from destroyed vineyards. The eruption left huge parts of the island covered in ash, which to this day is being removed by the environmental agents, but also through the inhabitant's daily sweeping routines, which could be approached as another form of care. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to converse with other actors potentially present in the field, or “*flying in and out*” of the field (Interview with Sophie Chao, Chao 2022c, 27:898), like for example volcanologists or representatives of the *Office of Economic Coordination and Assistance for those affected by the volcano on the island of La Palma* (orig. *Oficina de Coordinación Económica y de Asistencia a los afectados por el volcán de la isla de La Palma*) or state agents responsible for territorial security, and defining the “uninhabitable zones”. However, in an in-depth engagement with the Tajogaite, the inclusion of a wide variety of actors would be fruitful (Interview with Sophie Chao, Chao 2022c, 7:198f).

When it comes to the assessment of the methodology of multispecies ethnography, this experimental and preliminary ethnography showed me, how any more-than-human being will always be understood from a human perspective. No matter how hard I tried to imagine a certain agency and ascribing characteristics to the volcano – they were all my imaginations, anthropomorphisms and ascriptions. Hence, any knowledge-making-process on a more-than-human research participant will inherently remain anthropocentric. However, the focus on a more-than-human research participant in multispecies ethnography offers a variety of advantages. Both the focus on a more-than-human being and the emphasis on “*taking seriously*” the human perspectives on it, allow for an in-depth and qualitative anthropology of epistemologies (Gingrich 2011: 177f, cit. in Pober, 2020: 27). The additional awareness of the ethnographers own research bias, and the influence of language on the perception of their field, makes multispecies ethnography – or more-than-human ethnography – an excellent entry point for researching at the intersections and entanglements of diverse epistemologies. An anthropology of knowledge-making-processes or epistemologies that includes emotion, can ask questions regarding epistemic hierarchies, violence, and validation mechanisms within epistemic communities, and provide in-depth anthropological knowledge on a more-than-human being.

DISCUSSION

My initial interest in multispecies ethnography emerged out of an interest in the epistemology of social and cultural anthropology in general. Departing from a certain understanding of anthropological knowledge-making, I wondered how anthropologists create knowledge not only with fellow humans but especially with the more-than-human. I was interested to what extent, if at all, more-than-human ethnography differs from human ethnography and what the ontological, epistemological, and methodological bases of multispecies ethnography are. Furthermore, I aimed to find specific methodical aspects to consider when researching on and with more-than-human beings and to reflect on the possibility of knowing the experiences of more-than-human beings at all. I was also curious about what it means to the anthropologists associated with multispecies ethnography to apply this “method” or way of thinking. To find answers to these pressing questions, I joined the Multispecies Speaker Series and held semi-structured online interviews with some of its participants. Coming from various backgrounds, the invited speakers talked about their research with rivers, palm trees, birds, and fake animals, among others. Based on my preliminary understanding of multispecies ethnography, which emerged from those interviews and talks, I decided to try the method myself in the course of an experimental ethnography with the volcano Tajogaite on La Palma. Following, I interpret my insights and findings from the Multispecies Speaker Series and the experimental ethnography with the Tajogatie in relation to my research questions and the theoretical framework regarding anthropological knowledge-making within its epistemological and ontological background.

1 WHAT THERE IS TO KNOW IN MULTISPECIES ETHNOGRAPHY

One of my research questions was on how anthropologists create knowledge with the more-than-human. If ethnographers rely on their common sense, imagination and experiences as humans to approximate understanding other human research participants vicariously, to what extent are the experiences of non-human participants knowable at all? To delve deeper into possible answers, it was necessary to first establish what there is to know in multispecies ethnography. Following, I depict my understanding of a multispecies ontology, based on the insights gathered during empirical research.

1.1 MULTISPECIES ONTOLOGY

As shared by the speakers of the Multispecies Speaker Series, multispecies ethnography expands the focus of knowledge-making to more-than-human entities, which span a wide range, from bacteria, fungi, rivers, and stones to nuclear waste, aliens, palm trees, rearing animals, symbolic animals, spirits, the transcendent, and the unseen. Particularly striking is that “species” in this context refers to many agentive beings beyond the definition of “species”, and can therefore include other more-than-human beings like symbolic animals, rivers, landscapes, spirits, the transcendent, and the unseen.

To find out what there is to know in multispecies ethnography, I found it fruitful to think within the ontological framework of critical and new realism, which allows to acknowledge a subject-independent and species-independent reality, while also recognizing the influence of sensory, emotional, social and ideological constructions into the process of knowledge-making about this reality. The fact that the speakers of the Multispecies Speaker series aimed to getting to know more-than-human beings through sensory immersion, and participation in the field, indirectly shows an ontological assumption of a subject-independent and species-independent reality.

When it comes to what there is to know in multispecies ethnography, a differentiation can be made between tangible beings – like rivers, palm trees, and animals – and those knowable only narratively and emotionally – like the transcendent, the unseen, and the invisible – through the engagement with human discourses. However, more-than-human beings are often experienced through both a sensory connection and the collection of narratives and human discourses about that more-than-human being. During my experimental ethnography with the volcano Tajogaite on La Palma, I experienced the presence of the volcano with all my senses, while collecting various narratives and frameworks of the volcano present in the field.

Recognizing the physical, emotional, and spiritual interconnectedness between humans and other beings and elements, is a basic ontological assumption of multispecies ethnography. While the inclusion of a variety of non-human beings in ethnographic research does align with a critical and new realist ontological position, it is important to notice that the scholars cogently produced knowledge about those more-than-human beings, but never together with them as knowledge-making agents. Anand Vivek Taneja raised the question of the religion of animals, but no inquiries about possible knowledge-making strategies of animals themselves were posed (Anand Vivek Taneja's talk, Taneja 2022a, 9:283f). Additionally, Sophie Chao mentioned in our interview, that it is clear, that our perspective on the more-than-human will remain inherently human and anthropocentric (Interview with Sophie Chao, Chao 2022c, 6:174). During my experimental ethnography with the Tajogaite, I realized that apart from a sensory experience, I could only research on different human perceptions, emotions, interpretations, and imaginations of the volcano. Therefore, even though the focus of the multispecies ethnographer widens to a variety of agentive beings in the field, those more-than-human participants remain excluded from the knowledge-making-processes within the anthropologist's "*epistemic community*" and thus maintain an object-like status. However, the focus on multispecies ethnography remains on how more-than-human entities shape and influence human actions, perceptions, and understandings of the world, thereby emphasizing the broadly understood agency of the more-than-human.

2 HOW TO KNOW THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN

Based on an understanding of what there is to know in multispecies ethnography – tangible and differently knowable more-than-human beings – I wondered how anthropologists create knowledge about those agentic beings present in the field. Following, I discuss knowledge-making strategies through sensory immersion and the engagement with various ways of thinking, as mentioned by the speakers of the Multispecies Speaker Series and other anthropologists.

2.1 MULTISPECIES EPISTEMOLOGY

2.1.1 SENSORY IMMERSION

“*Deep multis-sensory immersion*” (Interview with Sophie Chao, Chao 2022c, 7:195) appears to play a vital role in acquiring knowledge about and with more-than-human beings and entities in the field. However, multispecies ethnographers are not the first to emphasize the sensory approach. Tamara Kohn’s traditional field research in Nepal explores perceptions that go beyond language and cannot be easily articulated but rather felt. She refers to Paul Stoller’s book *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* (Kohn 1994: 19), where Stoller highlights that the Songhay people from Niger “*taste kinship, smell witches, and hear ancestors*” (Stoller 1989:5, cited in Kohn, cited in Pober 2020: 22), emphasizing the significance of senses in ethnography. Judith Okely, in her work *Vicarious and sensory knowledge of chronology and change* (Okely 1994: 45f, cited in Pober 2020: 22), focuses on the limitations of spoken words in conveying past and changing experiences among humans. She emphasizes the embodied nature of knowledge through the senses of sight, taste, hearing, touch, and smell. During her field research in rural France, Okely examines the changing circumstances of older individuals. To better understand the implicit knowledge of the older generation, Okely prioritizes sensory knowledge over linguistic expressions by immersing herself in the region’s agriculture. This approach aligns with critical realism and the enactivist approach to knowledge-making from cognitive science, which emphasize the embodiment of cognition and the exchange of verbalized sensory experiences in intersubjective interaction. However, Okely reflects that knowledge cannot solely rely on sensory data due to socio-cultural and historical mediation and interpretation of the senses, as well as the subjective weight and significance assigned to different senses. Reproducing identical experiences is also impossible, as sensory knowledge is not a direct representation of reality. Okely suggests that

understanding the experiences of other humans involves considering mundane everyday experiences, often overlooked sensory impressions, and one's own background. The continuous engagement of anthropologists in the field leads to a well-founded, sensory, and implicit knowledge that forms the basis for understanding the experiences of other participants, despite the inability to fully replicate those experiences. Tamara Kohn and Judith Okely provide remarkable examples of the importance of sensory immersion in the field, predating the emergence of multispecies ethnography. This highlights that awareness of sensory perception in the field is not unique to multispecies ethnography. What sets this approach apart is the expanded focus on more-than-human beings and entities. As Sophie Chao illustrates, deep multisensory immersion is crucial in incorporating more-than-human beings. Knowledge about a more-than-human research participant is not solely derived from an intellectual understanding but also from physically engaging with it through our senses. Multispecies scholars apply a deep multisensory immersion, using all senses to grasp their physical environment. Additionally, this approach acknowledges the mutual transformation of the researcher and the researched through sensory immersion and bodily engagement with the environment. It is essential to recognize that the senses are mediated, and perception is influenced by assumptions and the theoretical concepts of anthropological discourse and theory in any ethnographic endeavour. Through observation and interaction with the more-than-human, but in particular, the observation and in-depth understanding of human interactions and relations with more-than-humans, an understanding of a particular human perspective on a more-than-human being can be gained.

2.1.2 COMBINING VARIOUS WAYS OF THINKING

André Gingrich, in his work *Evidence in Socio-cultural Anthropology* (Gingrich 2011: 177f; cited in Pober 2020: 27), argues that it is crucial to develop a comparative anthropology of epistemologies. He specifically highlights the importance of comparing non-monotheistic epistemologies and philosophical traditions that do not rely on the concept of a singular creator. To achieve this, Gingrich suggests integrating phenomenological elements into cultural and social anthropological epistemology to enable a comprehensive analysis of epistemologies in different societies. Christina Toren shares this perspective but acknowledges the challenge of doing justice to the worldviews of others (Toren 2011: 130f; cited in Pober 2020: 27). She emphasizes that recognizing a common reality as the foundation for diverse worldviews is a fundamental prerequisite for understanding other ontologies and

epistemologies. Toren also highlights the importance of understanding that our own worldviews and scientific paradigms are shaped by socio-cultural and historical factors.

Based on this, it can be inferred that the explanatory power of ethnographic studies lies in transforming the categories used by research participants into analytical concepts. Sometimes, anthropological categories are deemed inadequate and limited when it comes to understanding other ontologies and epistemologies. Marcio Goldman's analysis of Candomblé exemplifies the notion that anthropologists should rely solely on the epistemologies and ontologies of the people they study and conduct field research among (Goldman 2011: 108f; cited in Pober 2020: 27). Henrietta Moore argues that anthropological understanding and interpretation are closely linked to the local knowledge of the people (Moore 2011: 207f; cited in Pober 2020: 27). Christina Toren emphasizes that ethnographic analysis enables anthropologists to transform local categories, lived practices, and worldviews into analytical categories (Toren 2011: 16; cited in Pober 2020: 27). Marian Kempny and Wojciech Burszta describe anthropological knowledge as a form of local knowledge, limited by the researchers' awareness and influenced by the factual nature inherent in the knowledge of the studied individuals (Kempny & Burszta, 1994: 91f).

Similarly, scholars of multispecies ethnography aim to incorporate different ways of thinking into their research on a more-than-human being. However, it can be argued that the extent to which multispecies scholars fully embrace different perspectives and write from diverse standpoints establishes a new standard. Sophie Chao's multispecies ethnography on oil palm and sago palm demonstrates the importance of integrating multiple voices and perspectives to gain a comprehensive understanding of the palm and its broader socio-cultural-historical context. Apart from considering the ways of thinking of human research participants, Chao also emphasizes the significance of including various emotional relationships with the palm. Anand Vivek Taneja fully embraces the perspective of birds as symbols of aspiration in his research context, without dismissing the conceptual frameworks of his research participants as "superstition." The depth of his work illustrates that by embracing different ways of thinking and believing, and by adopting field-specific concepts, richer and more comprehensive ethnographies can be produced without the need to bridge conceptual gaps. When it comes to deeply engaging with various epistemologies regarding a more-than-human being in the field, it remains crucial to reflect on epistemic hierarchies and violences among and within epistemic communities. Diverging somewhat from mere epistemological comparisons, multispecies scholars appear to genuinely engage with the ways of thinking within their field, particularly in relation to more-than-human beings, aiming to paint a fuller picture of their fieldwork situations.

2.1.2.1 LANGUAGE AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS

Since multispecies ethnography is situated at the intersections of different ways of sensing, knowing, and communicating, the translation and between those ways of thinking and knowing becomes crucial. Just as most ethnographers, multispecies scholars are not exempted from the challenges that arise when doing ethnographic fieldwork within the realm of multiple languages and conceptual frameworks. Language is tied to the way we think and perceive, and as such an essential part of knowledge-making-processes. The choice of language used in ethnographic writing is situated in a field of epistemic hierarchy among different ways of knowing, tied to different languages. Translating between those various ways of knowing present in the field can certainly become a challenge, in particular when the translatability of concepts is not given. The use of language can thereby also become a tool of resistance to neocolonial and epistemic violence in the field. However, it remains open to the researcher how to include linguistic tools from the field to describe multispecies relations and eventually translate them to their audiences.

Angel Díaz de Rada and Francisco Cruces, in their field research at rock concerts in Madrid, explore the connection and difference between analytical concepts in anthropology and the social practices that these concepts aim to describe. They examine the possibility of approaching local linguistic expressions through analytical concepts in anthropology, while also acknowledging limitations and imperfections (Díaz de Rada & Cruces 1994: 101f; cit. in Pober, 2020: 28). They explore the “*conceptual vacuum*” that arises when translating embodied experiences into analytical categories. Based on the mentioned issue, Díaz de Rada and Cruces explore the extent to which anthropological analytical concepts can approach, capture, or reconstruct these local concepts. Reducing social practice to linguistic concepts entails deficiencies and the risk of a “*conceptual vacuum*” that separates analytical concepts from the realities they analyse. To bridge this gap, Diaz de Rada and Cruces propose considering the embedding of social practices within their systems of meaning and significance. Rituals are to be read as if they were texts. The use of metaphorical elements to represent social practice is an attempt to overcome the distance between practice and analytical description.

A certain “*conceptual vacuum*” presents itself, when researchers like Noha Fikry or Anand Vivek Taneja aim to bridge the gap between the analytical concepts of anthropological discourse and the actual concepts and impressions of the field. Noha Fikry laments, that due to a certain training in ethnography, many anthropologists still refuse to thoroughly believe in

their research participants way of thinking and emphasizes the importance of “taking seriously” the human discourses present in the field. Similarly, Anand Vivek Taneja points out, that due to a particular training, anthropologists often remain at a certain theoretical distance to their field. Kim TallBear bridges this conceptual gap by translating between different ways of knowing and theorizing on a daily basis, and by using various languages within academic discourse. Sophie Chao addresses this conceptual vacuum by incorporating original field concepts directly into her ethnographic writing. When it comes to translating between and beyond theoretical frameworks, multispecies ethnography doesn’t appear to differ significantly from previous attempts at bridging this gap. However, what sets multispecies ethnography apart is its comprehensive approach and commitment to genuinely engaging with diverse epistemologies and conceptual frameworks present in the field.

It remains crucial to reflect on how theoretical concepts emerging from within the discourse on multispecies ethnography impact and influence the ethnographic research situation. Thinking in terms of relationality and entanglement, opposing romanticism, secularism, and scientific rationalism – as practised by the speakers of the Multispecies Speaker Series – might not always be the predominant way of thinking prevalent in the field. Furthermore, since the discourse on multispecies ethnography emerged from academia of the Global North using a language based in Western epistemology and a dichotomic understanding of human-nature-relations, a focus on the more-than-human as a reaction to climate change and biodiversity loss might obscure relevant social inequalities and pressing human issues, masking global epistemic inequalities, hierarchies, and violence.

3 **METHODICAL PECULIARITIES OF RESEARCHING ON THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN**

In addition to a focus on what there is to know and how to know it in multispecies ethnography, I wondered whether there are any additional methodical aspects to consider when researching on and with more-than-human beings. In the course of this research I aimed to find out, to what extent more-than-human ethnography differs from human ethnography.

3.1 **MULTISPECIES METHODS**

From what I gathered in the Multispecies Speaker Series, the methodology of “more-than-human” ethnography doesn’t really deviate significantly from “human” ethnography. Nevertheless, what sets this approach apart is its heightened sensory attention to more-than-human beings in the field and its willingness to incorporate diverse analytical frameworks, beliefs, narratives, and ways of thinking. This inclusive approach aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of ethnographic subjects by considering multiple perspectives.

To engage with multiple perspectives on a more-than-human being, Sophie Chao suggests to “*follow the thing*” and to “*bring as many voices into the mix as possible*” (Interview with Sophie Chao, Chao 2022c, 7:222f and 5:201f). By including various ways of knowing and conceptualizing the more-than-human being, a richer picture of it can be drawn. When researching on the perspectives of various actors, it is, according to Chao, essential to reflect on epistemic hierarchies within and among epistemic groups, and to question which perspectives are being foregrounded, and why. It is important to notice that the emotional relation to a more-than-human being forms an essential part of a “perspective” on it. By “*following the thing*”, the multispecies ethnographer can eventually engage in the historical dimension of a more-than-human being. In her research on oil palm plantations, Chao traced the transformations which oil palm has gone through, from being a West-African, semi-wild crop to a global and contemporary commodity, while focussing on the “*ways in which the plant has been shaped by colonial circuits, race, and the plantation logic as a material form but also racializing assemblage*”, which was crucial to situate the palm tree within its broader socio-cultural-historical and political context (Interview with Sophie Chao, Chao 2022c, 7:222f).

When it comes to writing, Noha Fikry demonstrated how to include more-than-human beings through experimental writing, all while acknowledging that any representation of a more-than-human being will be human-made, and hence inherently anthropocentric. Engaging in

different possibilities, and experimentally writing from different angles allows for a deeper elaboration of an ethnographic situation. In Fikry's field case with an absent chicken, she employed three different writing styles, one distancing from the chicken and the fox through its analytical and theoretical framework, one taking both humans and more-than-human actors seriously, and one imaginatively narrating from the perspective of a fox. Fikry emphasizes the experimental nature of including more-than-human actors, and acknowledges the limitations of interpreting more-than-human voices or thoughts (Interview with Noha Fikry, Fikry 2022a, 7:207f). However, her fieldwork example has shown, that in particular the unseen and the invisible can be narrated through experimental vignettes, rooted in the perspectives of the field (ibid.).

4 REFLECTIONS ON MULTISPECIES ETHNOGRAPHY

Apart from questioning the methodological bases of multispecies ethnography, I was keen to find out what it means to do multispecies ethnography for the speakers of the Multispecies Speaker Series. During our interview, Anand Vivek Taneja highlights the importance of considering multispecies ethnography and the ecological turn in anthropology within the framework of climate crisis and global warming. According to Taneja (Interview with Anand Vivek Taneja, Taneja 2022b, 10:314f), adopting a broader, animistic perspective on more-than-human relations can be advantageous in the current crisis situation,

"I think given the age of global warming and climate change we live in, I think we'd all do well in being a little more animistic in our thinking" (ibid. 12:372f).

This gives rise to the assumption that multispecies ethnography emerged out of a preoccupation for climate change, biodiversity loss, and its destructive affects on human life on Earth. In his talk, Taneja reflects on this perspective by saying,

"[...] it is interesting that at that moment when you are talking about a huge moment of crisis and destruction, you turn to the other-than-human to be able to articulate the true pain of it [...]" (Anand Vivek Taneja's talk, Taneja 2022a, 24:786)

Focussing on the more-than-human could therefore be an attempt to ease the emotional and physical distress connected to climate change and biodiversity loss, as well as to find solutions to ease the effects of climate change. However, this might not be the only reason, multispecies ethnography emerged. Kajri Jain contributes to the contextualization of multispecies ethnography by highlighting the issue of academic overproduction and how it relates to the emergence of multispecies ethnography. Jain discusses how the convergence of individual precarity and planetary precarity has shaped the current situation,

“[...] so it’s an individual precarity meets planetary precarity, that drives us into this mode, of just lingering onto something, because this is very much the sense I have. Is this a band wagon, that is rolling though town, and everyone is just desperately climbing onto it, without really thinking sometimes about what they’re doing?”

(Kajri Jain’s discussion, Jain 2022, 19:630f).

In this regard, climate anxiety among scholars and artist might have presented an opportunity to enthrall a wider audience with the possibility of doing research with more-than-human beings, which was being accepted and engaged with, often without a thorough reflection of its functioning. Curiously, even though multispecies ethnography might have emerged out of a planetary crisis rooted in a dichotomic understanding of human-nature relations, it uses a scientific terminology, originated in the very ways of classifying, studying, objectifying and dominating the “species” related to such dichotomic thinking.

While some multispecies scholars refer to Jakob von Uexküll (cf. Schroer 2021) who inherently opposed this kind of classification and objectification and proposed accepting our inability to fully understand other “species”, though acknowledging their agency and specific ways of perceiving, the term “species” inadvertently reproduces the epistemic violence and binary “human-nature” thinking that contributed to colonial extractivism and the ongoing climate crisis. In this regard, Kim TallBear expresses frustration as a Dakota person with the scholars who mistakenly believe that this way of thinking, which emphasizes relationships with non-human entities, is entirely new, disregarding the fact that indigenous thinking has long existed,

“[...] I think those people in the academy that are thinking through multispecies kinds of frameworks and the new materialism [...] they don’t know indigenous thinking exists. They think this is all new” (Kim TallBear’s talk, TallBear 2022, 5:148f).

Relational thinking with the more-than-human is a characteristic of indigenous thinking, and not introduced by multispecies ethnography, according to TallBear. In her talk, she also mentions the ways Dakota people can relate to the river by using a wide variety of linguistic tools, which English does not offer. Since the languages of the field might offer another way, and sometimes a much wider variety, of thinking about and with a more-than-human being, the use of local language in ethnographic writing can become a tool of resistance to neocolonial and epistemic violence in the field. Sophie Chao narrates her path to using “*more-than-human*” rather than “*multispecies*” due to its inherent epistemically violent etymology,

“[...] multispecies very much still relates tethered to the concept of the species, that is itself by no means a universal way of classifying, let alone relating to non-human life. [...] After a lot of reflection and conversation with indigenous scholars like Zoey Todd

and Kim TallBear, [...], I've moved to a language that sits actually much better as well with the ways in which the people I work with actually talk about their own worlds [...]" (Interview with Sophie Chao, Chao 2022c, 13:425f).

Diverging from the term "species", Chao chose to engage with "more-than-human", due to its better adequacy and accuracy within her research. Since language and knowledge-making are inherently intertwined, this shift might also present an attempt to decolonize knowledge-making and counter-act current structures of epistemic hierarchies and violence.

This aspiration might have also been related to the land acknowledgements read out during the online video conference sessions by Bradley Dunseith from Canada, and Sophie Chao from Australia. It remains to be studied, whether climate change and climate anxiety are shaping a possible idealization and essentialization of indigenous thinking, and how such a possible idealization might be linked to the emergence of multispecies ethnography.

PART V – METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

1 REFLECTIONS ON DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Digital ethnography, also known as “remote” ethnography, presents various new challenges, advantages, and disadvantages. During my research, I had to adapt to the field and conduct digital ethnography as the primary focus of my research was an online event. The Multispecies Speaker Series took place online from February to May 2022. Initially, the Ethnography Lab of the University of Toronto organized on-site events, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars and students adapted to the new situation of lockdowns and curfews by organizing events through the video conferencing software, Zoom. After contacting the convener of the Multispecies Ethnography Group via email to register, I gained access to the events’ Zoom link and conducted online participant observation through Zoom. Following the last online talk and discussion, I contacted all participants for an interview and was fortunate to interview Sophie Chao, Anand Vivek Taneja, Noha Fikry, and Bradley Dunseith via Zoom. Therefore, my initial research solely took place through Zoom and email. Consequently, this presented me with several questions and observations that I describe below. At first, I was hesitant to conduct digital ethnography because I felt I would not obtain enough data and would not be able to fully immerse myself in the field. As a result, I planned and organized an additional research project that would allow me to try multispecies ethnography through sensory immersion in the field. However, after transcribing all the talks and interviews and gathering additional literature, I realized that “only” digital ethnography had provided more than enough data.

During the initial talks, I did not immediately jot down my impressions, feelings, and observations. I assumed that the talks would be recorded, so I could participate first and take note of my observations and thoughts while watching the recordings later. However, this was a mistake since it took several weeks to receive the recordings, and by then, I had forgotten my initial impressions and feelings in the different online situations. Watching the recording of oneself participating in an online conference evokes completely different feelings than experiencing it first-hand.

1.1 USING VIDEOTELEPHONY FOR ONLINE INTERVIEWS

In regards to interviewing via Zoom, I reflected on various aspects. First, online interviews come with a set of advantages. An online interview does not necessarily lead to a decline in quality compared to the challenges and imperfections that on-site interviews sometimes face. If it goes well, an online interview can indeed evoke a feeling of co-presence and intimacy, and they give participants the chance to stay in a comfortable place of their choice and eventually stop an interview easily at any time. For some participants, videotelephony software they are comfortable with might even provide a more pleasant interview situation than a face-to-face interview.

On the other hand, there are also disadvantages to online interviews. Emotions are not as easily perceptible through Zoom, as body posture, gestures, facial expressions, and changes in the tone of voice might be harder to grasp through two-dimensional pixels and sound waves. In addition, access to the internet and communication technology varies widely, and assuming easy and free access for everyone would mask socio-demographic divides among participants and render invisible who is being left out. The fact that the interviewee as well as the interviewer both see an image of themselves during an online conversation might influence the course of the conversation, the way one presents themselves, or controls their facial reactions to the interlocutor. Christine Hine (2015: 187f) calls for thorough ethical reflection before conducting online interviews regarding the well-being and the privacy of interviewees. According to her, it is essential to consider the impossibility of guaranteeing privacy, managing huge amounts of stored data, and adapting the choice of videotelephony software to the needs of one's interviewees.

1.2 ABOUT THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF SENSORY IMMERSION AND SHARED EXPERIENCE ONLINE

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of Zoom and other videotelephony software for online classroom teaching, conferences, and staying in contact with friends and family became an important strategy for living with the pandemic and its consequential lockdowns. The fact that the University of Toronto, like many other universities, turned to such software had the significant advantage of enabling my online participation. The talks I was interested in were scheduled over a period of five months, and for financial and ethical reasons, I would not have been able to make five return flights to Canada. Building on my epistemological understanding of fieldwork, I initially reflected on the possibility of gaining “*vicarious*

knowledge” (Okely 1994: 34f) through sensory immersion in the field. During our interviews, my research participants joined our Zoom meetings from Egypt, Canada, Australia, and India, while I stayed in my apartment in Vienna. It was, of course, impossible to have any sensory impression of the environments of my participants or to grasp additional unexpected ethnographic information from their physical and social surroundings. Zoom does not transfer olfactory, gustatory, or tactile information, and my perception of the online events was limited to the audiovisual experience of transferred pixels and sound, and the somatic experience of using a laptop. I decided to assume that the transferred pixels and sound waves represented real persons and not chatbot avatars, due to their ability of making good jokes, their facial expressions, gestures, grammar structures, accents, and voices, as well as their particular reactions to my questions and jokes. I accepted the fact of sensory limitation in digital ethnography, as it is an inherent part of the field I was studying.

All participants used some kind of computer to join the events, resulting in similar limitations to their audiovisual perception. Even the somatic experience was shared to some extent, such as sitting for the duration of the talk or interview and watching two-dimensional pixelated images on screens while listening to computer-generated audio waves. What cannot be fully perceived on Zoom are the physical surroundings of the interlocutor. Whether there are other people in the room, the weather sensation, or the exact location of the person remain unclear. What is possible to observe, however, are the background images of Zoom participants. Some present themselves in front of ample bookshelves, some blur their background image, others seem not to be sitting on a chair and table, and yet others turn off their camera all together. Christine Hine states that the online space can be approached as an ethnographic field similar to a landscape – which is at the one hand natural, but also man-made and which comes to us through human practices (Hine 2015: 51). She especially emphasizes the importance of reflecting on our emotional immersion into the field (ibid. 42). While dwelling online, the researcher should open up to a kind of affective experience and reflect on how it feels to be co-present with another person in that field, what can be understood by them and where we feel separate.

2 **METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON EXPERIMENTAL ETHNOGRAPHY ON-SITE**

After completing most of the interviews and all online talks, I decided to try multispecies ethnography myself. The idea of including a landscape into ethnography intrigued me the most, so I designed a short-term research project based on the question of including the recently active volcano “Tajogaite” on the Canary Island of La Palma. With my understanding of multispecies ethnography at the time, I spent the month of August 2022 close to the volcano and had informal conversations with my hosts, acquaintances, and the volcano guards. Multispecies ethnography is an experimental, interdisciplinary field, and there is no clear consensus on how to conduct it. Therefore, I understood that it would be part of the research to be open about the methodological possibilities of including more-than-human beings in my research. However, my biggest concern were the ethical implications of doing research on a site of natural disaster. Even though the eruption of the volcano had stopped eight months before my stay, the disastrous consequences were still very much present. The idea of potentially re-traumatizing someone by casually bringing up the topic of the eruption was very worrisome and initially made me avoid this topic altogether. Instead, during the first days of my stay, I spent time in coffee houses, on the market, and in a fitness centre. I joined public festivities like the delayed carnival and a car race, and talked to my host and neighbours about possible hikes around Los Llanos. Later on, I realized that playing the role of a tourist might not be the best approach when I met Spanish-speaking tourists from other Canary Islands who visited La Palma for volcano sightseeing. It felt wrong to me to watch the recently erupted volcano just as an exciting sight, while the inhabitants who had lost all of their belongings were most likely still suffering from trauma and living in inadequate shelters. At that moment, I decided to abandon my research project on La Palma altogether, as I could not find a way to ethically justify this project to myself. However, later on, I luckily discovered the volcano guards by accident and found suitable research participants in them. They allowed me to learn more about what had happened to the inhabitants of the affected areas without threatening their well-being.

The guards were typically very talkative and appeared pleased to speak with an anthropology student who was interested in their perspective, sharing stories ranging from personal losses to public decisions about the volcano and its impact on land creation. Regrettably, I did not plan to conduct interviews with the volcano guards, as I seldom encountered the same guard twice during my random moped excursions around the volcano. In hindsight, I acknowledge that it would have been relatively simple to arrange an interview date with the guards during

one of their shifts, but for some reason, it did not occur to me at the time. As a result, the most difficult aspect for me was to note everything I could recall from our casual conversations immediately after I left and parked my rented moped around the next bend. Although I was able to gather some data from our informal conversations thanks to the volcano guards, I was concerned that this research would not be compatible with the rest of my work. Fortunately, later on, I was able to link my attempts at conducting multispecies ethnography with the experiences of the scholars I interviewed.

2.1 ETHICAL REFLECTIONS ON RESEARCHING ON A SITE OF NATURAL DISASTER

The recent eruption of the “Tajogaite”, which lasted from September to December 2021, was the island’s longest recorded eruption and of catastrophic magnitude. The lava flow destroyed many people’s houses, farms, banana plantations, and three entire villages. Thanks to early warning systems, around 7,000 people in affected areas were evacuated on time, and no casualties were reported. However, during my stay on La Palma in August 2022, many people were still residing in temporary housing, and the destruction was still very perceptible. My host, a 60-year-old woman renting out former rooms of her two children to temporary employees, was well acquainted with how the neighbouring villages looked like before the eruption. During a casual conversation at the beginning of my stay, she mentioned that she was not personally affected by any property loss, but still felt uneasy about visiting the places where the villages Todoque, Los Campitos, and La Laguna were practically “erased from the map”. Considering the context of my research – the self-serving pursuit of obtaining an academic title – I decided to take a step back and carefully seek interactions without risking the emotional well-being of my potential research participants. I therefore initially decided not to mention the eruption to anyone in casual conversations or interviews at all, as the magnitude of trauma was most likely beyond my understanding. However, on one of my trips around the volcano, I discovered the volcano guards. Positioned in little wooden huts on streets that lead to the volcano, their task was to inform the public and tourists about the volcano and to prevent anyone from crossing certain points, protecting them from possible gases and hot spots. Another important task was to protect the volcanic landscape of smooth black ash hills from being stepped on and “destroyed” by people, thereby conserving them for future tourism. The volcano guards were temporarily employed by the Ministry of Environment (*La Consejería Medio Ambiente del Cabildo de La Palma*). They usually sat alone in their hut, equipped with water bottles, gas measurement devices, and walkie-talkies

for around eight hours per shift, regardless of the weather. Some of them were students, while others were formerly unemployed, or single mothers. All the guards I talked to came from other parts of the island or even from other Canary islands. None of the guards I talked to was personally affected by any property loss due to the eruption, but one of them was friends with someone who lost their house. I found that for the guards I talked to, my curious questioning seemed to provide a welcomed alternative to an otherwise long and monotonous working shift. Many seemed to enjoy informing me about what had happened and eagerly told me stories they had heard about people who used to live there. Having had these experiences, I was glad to have found suitable research participants who allowed me to talk about the volcano seemingly without risking the well-being of my research participants but on the contrary, offering them a pastime activity. As I returned to different huts on different days, I met different volcano guards and brought soft drinks, snacks, and sunscreen as thanks for our conversations.

2.2 SENSORY IMMERSION AND MULTISPECIES ETHNOGRAPHY

Upon arriving at the volcano, I quickly realized the crucial role of bodily immersion for the experimental nature of multispecies ethnography. As illustrated by Sophie Chao in *The Shadow Of The Palm* (2022), the senses of touch, wetness and dryness, taste, and smell were integral to her understanding of the Sago Palm's significance for her research participants. Similarly, as Judith Okely's ethnography in rural France demonstrated, the smell (and perhaps other sensory experiences like the taste and feel) of the local earth, cheese, and lavender was essential in understanding the lives of the elderly in rural France. In the same vein, I couldn't have fully comprehended the physical presence of the Tajogaite volcano without experiencing its distinct smells (such as various gases), its hot surface, the rough touch of its black ashes, its unique sounds, and surreal landscapes that spanned the island. These sensory experiences, along with light aftershocks at night, allowed me to vicariously understand to some extent what it's like to live with a volcano.

2.3 REFLECTION ON EXPERIMENTAL MORE-THAN-HUMAN ETHNOGRAPHY

Based on my experimental multispecies ethnography involving a volcano, I have observed that selecting a more-than-human entity as the initial focus of research can serve as a fruitful entry point into ethnographic fieldwork. Over time, one will inevitably encounter different ways of understanding, meaning, knowing, and producing knowledge pertaining to the more-than-human “participant”. I realized that is important to bear in mind that despite multispecies ethnography’s emphasis on “nature,” “the environment,” or “animals,” it remains firmly rooted within the realm of human knowledge construction as basis for anthropological research. Regardless of how creatively one endeavours to speak on behalf of a volcano, a bird, a palm, artificial animals, or an invisible visitor, the perspectives and interpretations that emerge will ultimately always reflect human perspectives. From my perspective, multispecies ethnography encourages researchers to reflect upon their own epistemic backgrounds and to challenge themselves to fully embrace different ways of knowing, to wholeheartedly believe in their participants’ perspectives, and to include diverse perspectives on more-than-human beings in their ethnographic work. Presumably stemming from climate anxiety in the global North, it also offers an opportunity to critically examine prevalent perspectives in the global North regarding “nature,” and to challenge the assumption that “nature” is inherently graspable in a scientific, objective, and “rational” manner, separate from humans.

3 REFLECTION ON THE WRITING PROCESS

The writing process of this thesis was challenging, since I felt I had to combine many different kinds of knowledge under one umbrella. Theoretical concepts, experiences of online ethnography which consisted of both my observations and participation in a social situation and social interactions as well as theoretical insight, and the “tacit”, pre-linguistic, emotional and sensory experiences of walking on the ashes of a recently erupted volcano. I found it particularly challenging to find a writing style that would fit to all of those different kinds of knowledge, so I decided to adapt my style to each type of knowledge. In the revision phase, I utilized artificial intelligence (ChatGPT 3.5) to correct this entire work and make it more reader-friendly. On one hand, this allowed me to address a certain disparity in my language proficiency in English, German, and Spanish; on the other hand, this corrective step might also mask inequalities in the production of academic texts within the community of anthropologists. It remains to be studied to what extent this corrective intervention influences epistemic hierarchies and the production of knowledge.

SUMMARY

Multispecies ethnography is an emergent methodological and theoretical approach within social and cultural anthropology, with interdisciplinary connections to other fields like biology, architecture, and art. It is an extended research method that goes beyond the human-animal binary and aims to acknowledge the entanglements of humans and other beings. In the wake of multiple global crises, this method comes with the exciting promise of understanding the connections to the more-than-human better than ever before. Unlike other approaches to including the non-human in ethnographic research, multispecies investigations highlight the possibility of making knowledge with and on more-than-human beings. These aspirations come with a set of challenges and risky endeavors, from the risk of essentializing, idealizing, and appropriating “indigenous” knowledge to the challenge of undertheorizing interdisciplinarity, disagreeing on methodologies, translating between and beyond ontologies, disregarding human inequalities, and ignoring the limits of human-and-more-than-human knowledge making. Intrigued by its promising possibilities, albeit sceptical towards a possible inclusion of non-human beings in ethnography, I aimed to find out more about the methodology of multispecies ethnography. The driving questions behind this research project evolved out of my previous interest in the epistemology of social and cultural anthropology.

Departing from assumptions on the ontology, epistemology and methodology of social and cultural anthropology, I wondered how anthropologists create knowledge not only with fellow humans but especially with more-than-human beings like animals, plants, landscapes, and invisible entities, during their participant observation in fieldwork. I explored the distinctions between more-than-human ethnography and human ethnography, investigated the ontological, epistemological, and methodological foundations of multispecies ethnography, examined potential methodical considerations when researching on and with more-than-human beings, evaluated the extent to which non-human participants’ experiences are knowable, and considered the implications for anthropologists applying multispecies ethnography. To find answers to my inquiries, I participated in the online held Multispecies Speaker Series, conducted semi-structured interviews with its participants, and experimentally engaged in a more-than-human ethnography with a volcano.

In the first part, I discussed the importance of exploring different ontologies and epistemologies in anthropology, highlighting the interdependence of these concepts. I delved into different ontological and epistemological positions, emphasizing the relevance of critical realism and constructivism, and their implications for understanding reality, for this study.

To comprehend multispecies ethnography, it proves beneficial to adopt a viewpoint that perceives reality as independent of both subjects and species, aligning with critical and new realist stances. This critical ontological position, emphasizing a subject-independent (and species-independent) reality, coupled with heightened self-awareness regarding the impact of sensory, emotional, social, and ideological constructs on the research process, provides a solid foundation for grasping multispecies ethnography. It remains essential to uphold methodological and epistemological relativist viewpoints to acknowledge diverse ways of knowing. Balancing both relativist and universal epistemological perspectives proves fruitful, as long as ontological relativism is avoided. Starting from the assumption of a subject-independent, experiential, and tangible reality, constructivist approaches to epistemology prove particularly fruitful, as they permit the recognition of multiple ways of knowing—an essential element in the context of multispecies ethnography. Recognizing the existence of various constructed truths intertwined with power relations becomes crucial in comprehending the intricate interconnections of humans and more-than-human beings in the field. Furthermore, I discussed definitions of knowledge from a cultural and social anthropological perspective. In exploring the concept of knowledge among cultural and social anthropologists, diverse perspectives emerge, encompassing considerations of individual perception, social embedding, and scientific validation in the field. The understanding of knowledge is shaped by the recognition that it is a social and embodied phenomena. While acknowledging the limitations of fully sharing and understanding others' experiences, it is certainly possible to strive to approximate that understanding through common sense and vicarious implicit knowledge stemming from deep sensory immersion and new encounters in unfamiliar contexts. Incorporating different epistemologies and local knowledge is essential for anthropological knowledge-making. However, the process of translating field experiences into written form poses challenges, as language may not fully capture the complexity of sensory perceptions and emotions. Implicit knowledge and non-verbal impressions are highly valued and contribute to the analysis. As ethnographer, it remains crucial to reflect on one's own socio-cultural-historical background and positionality in the field to be aware of their impact on understanding other humans and their relation to more-than-human beings.

In the second part of the thesis I gave an overview of the four talks held within the Multispecies Speaker Series and depicted the insights gained from the talks and my interviews with Sophie Chao, Anand Vivek Taneja, Noha Fikry, and Bradley Dunseith. To explore the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of "multispecies ethnography," I conducted semi-structured online interviews with scholars and PhD students who were actively engaged in

this approach. I participated in the *Multispecies Speaker Series*, a series of talks organized by the *Ethnography Lab* of the University of Toronto. During these sessions, scholars such as Sophie Chao, Kim TallBear, Anand Vivek Taneja, and Kajri Jain shared insights into their past, ongoing, and future research projects within the framework of multispecies ethnography. Notably, these scholars embraced a broad interpretation of “multispecies,” extending beyond traditional living organisms to encompass the unseen, invisible, supernatural, spiritual elements, as well as fake animals and landscapes. Multispecies ethnography distinguishes itself by actively incorporating more-than-human entities as subjects of research. In the Multispecies Speaker Series, the notion of potential research subjects was expansively interpreted, attributing agency to various entities that contribute to shaping and transforming the world. Consequently, the researcher’s focus extended beyond real animals like birds, goats, and chickens to include palm trees, rivers, aliens, nuclear waste, fake animals, unseen creatures, invisible spirits, and transcendent birds. Multispecies ethnography seeks to encompass not only traditional species like plants and animals but also a diverse array of more-than-human entities, such as spirits and the unseen, which may not neatly fit within the conventional classification of “species.” The conceptualization of more-than-human entities in the field is characterized by a focus on entanglement, interactions, and relationality. Scholars acknowledge that not all human and more-than-human relations are romantic; some can even be toxic. Criticism is directed toward an overtly rational approach to these relations, as it is seen as potentially secularizing more-than-human connections. The relationship between humans and more-than-humans can be spiritual, eluding comprehension through purely scientific or romantic frameworks. Consequently, there is a rejection of scientific rationality, secularity, and romanticism in favour of “taking seriously” diverse human perspectives and relationships with the more-than-human. As it became clear during the talks of the Multispecies Speaker Series, language is intricately linked to human perceptions, constituting a fundamental aspect of knowledge-making processes. In ethnographic writing, the selection of language is embedded in an epistemic hierarchy that reflects different ways of knowing, each associated with distinct languages. Negotiating translations between these varied ways of knowing, especially when the translatability of concepts is uncertain, can pose a significant challenge. The use of language in this context can also serve as a tool of resistance against neocolonial and epistemic violence in the field. To comprehend the more-than-human within an ethnographic context, scholars from the Multispecies Speaker Series proposed diverse and innovative methodological approaches. While sensory immersion is a standard practice in current ethnography, multispecies ethnography advocates for a profound multi-sensory engagement to fully apprehend the more-than-human. Furthermore, careful observation of

more-than-human entities and interactive experiences contribute to a nuanced understanding. Significantly, incorporating human perspectives, narratives, and interpretations of the more-than-human proves essential. While it is acknowledged that comprehending a more-than-human being from a non-human perspective is inherently challenging, integrating diverse human viewpoints within a multi-faceted “follow-the-thing” approach is valuable. Employing imaginative and experimental writing techniques allows for the inclusion of the more-than-human in ethnographic narratives. Some participants of the Multispecies Speaker Series advocated for overcoming anthropocentrism by shifting the focus of ethnographic inquiry away from humans or at least not solely on humans. However, it is important to acknowledge that all knowledge production is inherently anthropocentric. Humans can never fully comprehend reality, but within sensory limitations, we can strive to approximate an understanding of it. These sensory approximations, often referred to as “multiple truths,” are deeply influenced by the socio-cultural-historical context of the epistemic community and are highly dependent on their specific context and validation mechanisms. This thesis has demonstrated that there can be multiple truths regarding any non-human being. The approach of multispecies ethnography, with its recognition of these epistemic differences, allows for a more comprehensive perspective to emerge on any given more-than-human being.

In the third part, I depicted the insights found through an experimental ethnography. Intrigued by the amalgamation of my newfound insights from the Multispecies Speaker Series and existing knowledge of anthropological knowledge-making, I was motivated to apply my preliminary understanding of multispecies ethnography in a practical setting. I embarked on an experimental study with the newly formed volcano Tajogaite on La Palma. Initially, confronted with pervasive pain and grief among locals, ethical considerations prompted a shift in focus to engage with less-affected individuals, specifically the volcano guards. Their insights illuminated diverse perspectives on the relationship between La Palma’s inhabitants and the Tajogaite, ranging from catastrophic fear to tourist attraction or geological fascination. The eruption’s aftermath revealed contrasting viewpoints and care practices, underscoring the anthropocentric nature of understanding more-than-human entities. Therefore multispecies ethnography offers valuable entry point into researching on various epistemologies, emphasizing an anthropology of knowledge-making processes. This approach allows for nuanced exploration of epistemic hierarchies, violence, and validation mechanisms within diverse epistemic communities, enriching anthropological knowledge on more-than-human beings and providing an in-depth understanding of an ethnographic situation.

CONCLUSION

Compared to earlier approaches to ethnography, multispecies ethnography significantly expands the scope of research participants beyond traditional human subjects, involving a diverse array of more-than-human beings, including rivers, plants, animals, stones, symbolic animals, and even the invisible. The approach goes beyond the classification of “species” to include various agentive beings, including spirits, the unseen, and the transcendent. Engaging with the volcano Tajogaite as a more-than-human being, the diversity of perspectives, from seeing the volcano as a catastrophic monster to a geological curiosity or a site of environmental care, highlighted the complexity, and emotional diversity in relating to a more-than-human being.

Multispecies ethnography is grounded in an ontological perspective that recognizes subject-independent and species-independent reality. It embraces a relational and entangled approach, emphasizing the importance of embodied experiences, sensory immersion, and pre-linguistic engagements in the field. The theoretical approach to multispecies ethnography prioritizes entanglement and relationality over a purely scientific or romantic framework, acknowledging that some relations can be spiritual and resist easy categorization.

From an epistemological standpoint, multispecies scholars emphasize the importance of language, acknowledging the challenges of fieldwork within multiple languages and the need for translation between different ways of thinking, while emphasizing the importance of acknowledging the researcher’s own bias and the impact of language on perception. The translation between different ways of thinking, especially linguistic tools from the field, becomes crucial, acknowledging language as an essential part of knowledge-making processes. The use of local languages in ethnographic writing is seen as a tool of resistance against neocolonial and epistemic violence. The insights from the experimental ethnography with a volcano suggest that adopting a more-than-human ethnographic approach necessitates a heightened awareness of the anthropocentric nature of knowledge-making processes. Multispecies ethnography encourages anthropologists to grapple with their own biases and the impact of language, offering an entry point for researching the intersections and entanglements of diverse epistemologies. As demonstrated in the experimental study, it invites anthropologists to engage with both the more-than-human and human perspectives seriously, fostering a qualitative anthropology of epistemologies that considers emotion, epistemic hierarchies, violence, and validation mechanisms within epistemic communities.

Multispecies ethnography does not significantly deviate from traditional ethnography in terms of methodology. However, it stands out for its heightened sensory attention to more-than-

human beings and its willingness to incorporate diverse analytical frameworks, beliefs, narratives, and ways of thinking. Scholars employ deep multisensory immersion – engaging all senses to understand more-than-human participants physically; participant observation – participating in everyday life, observing interactions, documenting human discourses and incorporating as many voices as possible; a follow-the-thing approach – researching historically embedded meanings of the more-than-human among multiple actors; and imaginative ethnographic writing – incorporating experimental vignettes into their writings to paint a fuller picture of the ways to think about the more-than-human being. Additionally, scholars engage in experimental ethnographic writing and imaginative vignettes to include the imagined voices of invisible and transcendent beings in their research. The approach encourages a deeper understanding of ethnographic situations by exploring various perspectives and realities present in the field.

Multispecies ethnography highlights the significance of understanding human interactions and meaning-making with more-than-human participants and recognizes that any knowledge made on or with more-than-human beings remains indirectly anthropocentric. Anthropologists engaged in multispecies ethnography must navigate the challenges of anthropocentrism, recognizing that any representation of more-than-human beings is inherently human-made. It requires reflexivity on language choices, considering the translatability of concepts, and addressing epistemic hierarchies and violence within and among epistemic communities. The commitment is to genuinely engage with diverse epistemologies and conceptual frameworks present in the field while being aware of potential idealizations and essentializations related to indigenous thinking. It emphasizes the importance of understanding and transforming the categories used by research participants into analytical concepts, considering diverse worldviews, and engaging with different epistemologies and conceptual frameworks present in the field.

These insights, derived from the Multispecies Speaker Series and related interviews, and an experimental ethnography with the volcano Tajogaite, contribute to a nuanced understanding of the foundations and practices of multispecies ethnography.

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ATTACHEMENT

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