

Conference
Ecological Nostalgias: Affect, Memory and Creativity

Université libre de Bruxelles – 14th and 15th of June 2017

Programme

14 June 2017

15.40 Welcome and introduction by Olivia Angé

16.00-16.40 Keynote by Roy Ellen

16.40-17.20 Keynote by Kirsten Hastrup

17.20-17.40 Comments by Laura Rival

17.40-18.00 Discussion

18.00-19.00 Cocktail

15 June 2017

9.15-9.30 Welcome at ULB

Session 1 (Chair: Perig Pitrou)

9.30-10.00 Nils Bubandt

10.00-10.30 Magnus Course

10.30-11.00 Discussion

Coffee break

Session 2 (Chair: Katie Dow)

11.30-12.00 Casey High

12.00-12.30 Olivia Angé

12.30-13.00 Discussion

Lunch

Session 3 (Chair: Véronique Joiris)

14.00-14.30 Olga Ulturgasheva

14.30-15.00 Richard Irvine

15.00-15.30 Cymene Howe

15.30-16.00 Discussion

Coffee break

Session 4 (Chair: Sasha Newell)

16.30-17.15 General Discussion.

17.15-17.30 Closing remarks by David Berliner

Diner

Abstracts

Happy Potato. Ecological Nostalgia and Interspecies Affect in the Peruvian Highlands

Olivia Angé, Université libre de Bruxelles

In the highland communities of the Cuzco region, potato is a keystone of agricultural and food practices. Yet, they are not treated as passive ingredients to be ingested. They are instead imbued with a subjectivity of their own, involving intentionality and emotionality. Potatoes' happiness (*alegria*) is a core concern to peasants who fear that they would stop thriving in the fields if they were displeased. This paper describes an array of practices intended to cheer potatoes up. Peasants nonetheless agree that young generations ignore the ethic of respect in potato-people interactions, thereby offending the precious tuber. Climatic instabilities, and ecological degradation are identified as other sources of discontent in the fields. This paper accounts for potato-people affectivities, showing how these happy potatoes, also are "affect aliens", in the sense of Ahmed, when they are a source of anxieties. Shifting affectivities between people and their tuber trigger narratives of an idealized vanishing past, whereby potato-people reciprocities entailed flourishing ecologies. This is also a prominent trope in in-situ conservation programmes intended to maintain agrobiodiversity in the potato cradle of domestication. By unravelling the temporality of potato happiness, this presentation addresses ecological nostalgia as it unfolds in interspecies companionship.

Coral Chronotopes: Assemblages of Ecological Millenarianism in Coastal West

Papua

Nils Ole Bubandt, University of Aarhus

In the coral archipelago called Raja Ampat, off the tip of West Papua in Indonesia, two kinds of ecological millenarianism are locked in mutuality. One millenarian account springs from a myth that tells of an ancestor who left the region for the West in mythical times but promised to return to Raja Ampat to bring about Koreri sieben, a paradisiac condition of plenty in which the dead will come from the sea to return to life. The second millenarian account derives from a conservationist and eco-tourist imaginary that describes Raja Ampat as “The Last Paradise on Earth”, an ecological hot-spot that not only contains the highest recorded marine bio-diversity in the world but possibly also holds the secret to resilience against coral bleaching in a high-CO₂ future. The paper describes how these two chronotopes interpellate each other. They are dreams of time and place that hail each other into existence through a common, but differently troubled, imaginary about ecological plenty. At the heart of both ecological chronotopes are corals, highly-productive but fragile symbiotic assemblages of polyps and dinoflagellates, which provide the basis for biodiversity, subsistence fishing as well as eco-tourism. The paper traces the nostalgia of corals, their fragility and promise, across the heterogeneous and partially related millenarian worlds of marine conservation, eco-tourism, and local ambition.

Time and Tide: cyclicity and nostalgia in the Scottish Outer Hebrides

Magnus Course, University of Edinburgh

In this paper, I explore the way in which the cyclicity of the tide forms the literal and figurative background to reflections on human finitude and societal change in a Gaelic-speaking fishing community in South Uist in the Scottish Outer Hebrides. I argue that a particular form of nostalgia is both enabled and constrained by the complex interplay of alternately cyclical and linear images of time in both human and non-human registers. Thus I explore how people's experience of history seems both cyclical (a story of migration backwards and forwards across the Eriskay straits and up into the glens) and linear (a story of Clearance, outmigration, and irreversible population decline). Such an experience of history is intimately linked to the sea, a medium which itself seems to display both cyclical (tides, migrating fish) and linear (declining fish stocks, increased environmental legislation) qualities. In conclusion, I suggest that the properties of the sea are not infinite, but rather constitute a specific set of affordances for reflecting on the passing of time. The broader argument therefore resonates with the workshop's ambition of thinking about the intersection of time, nostalgia, and the environment.

Thinking through Nostalgia in Anthropologies of the Environment and Ethnographies of Landscape

Roy Ellen, University of Kent

Memory is everywhere in current anthropological writing - whether as a subject of research or as a trope - such that some observers think it much overplayed. In this paper I critically examine the treatment accorded to memory in human adaptation and what we might conveniently call 'anthropologies of the environment'. In the first part I argue that from being implicit in the explanatory apparatus of ecological and environmental anthropology at least since Steward, the role of memory has not always been explicit. Indeed, as we move through successive and competing paradigms, so we transition from denial and ignorance to increasing acknowledgement. In this context ecological nostalgia can be seen as the selective use of memory to create potent and evocative valuations of particular scenarios which impact on how people store, represent and use environmental information, the consequences of which vary depending on different socio-cultural configurations. In the second part I focus on two case studies that show how specific ecological nostalgias are dependent on the ways people make their environments, both physically and conceptually. In situations where states have come to re-define environmental relations, nostalgias can in various ways become 'false', through a process in which, variously, science, governments, stakeholder citizens, heritage specialists and traditional peoples may all in different ways be complicit. I illustrate this with reference to research conducted in and around the Batu Apoi national park in Brunei during the mid 1990s, and among Nuaulu people on Seram, during the period 2000-2015 as they put together arguments in support of negotiations with the Indonesian government to establish an independent devolved administration. I show how the complexities of historical process prevent any easy definition of what constitutes 'ecological nostalgia' in this instance, while at the same time reinforcing notions of ancient political autonomy that have transformed Nuaulu relations with the state.

Arctic Nostalgias Past and Present: Towards a New Ecology of Non-Scalable Socialities?

Kirsten Hastrup – University of Copenhagen

The Inughuit community of Northwest Greenland lives with the consequences of rapid climate change, deeply affecting their High Arctic landscape. They are consistently portrayed as canaries in the coalmine, and truly their lives are changing in concert with the changing sea-ice and the erratic behaviour of animal species on which they have depended for their ancient hunting livelihood, and for which they have strong affects. Taking off from this case, the main tenet of the presentation is to question *whose* nostalgia we are dealing with, when we talk of a *longing* for the past, of *lost* contacts between species, and of the *affects* embedded in human-nonhuman relations. While providing astute analytical reference points, there is a risk that such concepts level the singularity and historicity of each case, even in the Anthropocene. This will be substantiated by drawing on anthropologists' perceptions of the Arctic wilderness around 1900, already then portraying the landscape and the people as relics from the past, as emphasized by their close relations to the animal world. The question is how anthropology can avoid nostalgia on its own behalf, and contribute substantially to a new vision of the Anthropocene, by highlighting the insistence by which 'nature' continues to claim its space among and beyond humans for instance. This could lead towards a new ecology of non-scalable social/natural communities for the future.

The Nature of Loss: Ecological Nostalgia and Cultural Politics in Amazonia

Casey High, University of Edinburgh

Amazonia has long since been a powerful object of nostalgia, seen a vanishing world of unique natural and cultural attributes to be preserved or remembered. In contrast to the economic interests that threaten the region, for many tourists, activists and wider publics what is at stake is a sense of irrevocable loss of an idealized cultural and ecological past. Whether describing the impending acculturation of indigenous peoples, excavating resonances of a pre-Columbian cosmology in the present, or insisting on the value of indigenous knowledge, Amazonianist anthropology exemplifies what Berliner describes as an “exo-nostalgia” for other peoples and places in its critical stance against modernity. Our insistence on the continuity of indigenous lived worlds and their agency in the context of social transformation is part of this nostalgic stance. In this paper I contrast our disciplinary exo-nostalgia to the “endo-nostalgia” of Waorani people who lament the alteration and disappearance of their own socionatural world in Amazonian Ecuador. In a context where familiar categories of “nature” and “culture” are not easily distinguished, I explore Waorani memories of and longings for the productive relations that oil development, colonization and changing settlement patterns have altered within their territory. I draw on Waorani memories of what has been lost in this process to explore the ontological status of *wao ome* (Waorani land). Do their narratives of past socionatural relations express a sense of irrevocable loss, or hope for a different future ecology? This process is complicated by Waorani involvement with state and NGO agendas regarding ecological preservation and emerging discourses of “culture”. By exploring what is transmitted across generations in memories of ecological loss, I draw contrasts between Waorani ecological nostalgias and Western formulations of history, heritage and modernity.

The Anticipatory Anthropocene/Ecology in the Future Subjunctive

Cymene Howe, Rice University

The materials and interactions that we call energy have always been constitutively formed from what is nominally bracketed as “the environment,” but the unfolding consequences of the Anthropocene and the instabilities of ecosystemic responses have proven their deepest interdependencies. This mutuality drives the analytic in this paper, proposing that while energy transition demands the adoption of less catastrophic fuel sources, equally critical is knowing the ways that humans articulate energetic desires—for light and heat, movement and flourishing—and how these correspond with or disrupt the energetic needs of other-than-human lives. Taking the case study of renewable wind power development in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexico, this paper takes transition in its densest form, one that must be understood as a mode of rehabilitation rather than resource extraction. Species that live in the figure of the wind—birds, bats, humans and others—exist in both parallels and incommensurabilities regarding how future ecologies will be created and ultimately remembered. In attempting to re-balance human aspirations for energy with the needs of all of the more-than-human beings with whom we are in orbit, we are invited to reconsider the logics of, and encounters with, ecology in the future subjunctive: an anticipatory occupation with the might-be.

Peaceful countryside: ecologies of longing and the temporality of flux in contemporary Mongolia

Richard Irvine, University of Cambridge

What does it mean to recall a landscape that you have not directly known? The starting point of this paper comes from research with primary school aged children (7-11) in Tuv aimag, Mongolia, and in particular the striking time-depth revealed in these children's narratives. Evoking a sense of the changing landscape under their feet, and a desire for an idealised vision of the countryside as it existed in a past they know vividly in spite of it predating their own experience, the children had a keen sense that the health of the countryside – their countryside – was diagnostic of the health of the nation, and in this way their close observation of local changes against the backdrop of the temporality of the environment gave them a vantage point to comment on geopolitical issues facing Mongolia. I move back and forth from this particular ethnographic setting to a wider discussion of environmental politics in contemporary Mongolia, exploring the significance of the children's reflections as just one instance of a much wider sense of 'ecological nostalgia' in contemporary Mongolian life, vividly apparent in popular music, art, and literature, which make clear that the idealised 'peaceful countryside' (*amgalan huduu*), as the site of 'authentic' life, is central to national identity even as (or perhaps especially as) the percentage of the population living in the capital city increases. I argue that the expression of nostalgic ecological ideals reveals something about what it means to live within, and to know, the temporality of a landscape in flux.

**Of Refugee Bears and Landslides: Eveny Observations of and Responses to the Latest
Environmental Transformations in Northeast Siberia**

Olga Ulturgasheva, University of Manchester

The paper will examine observations and responses of Siberian Eveny reindeer herders and hunters to the latest threatening dynamic of climate change cascading through a number of risk situations such as forest fires, dramatic fluctuations of seasonal patterns, rapidly changing animal behaviour, melting permafrost that cause frequent flash floods and landslides as well as contribute to further collapse of an already fragile and worn-out post-Soviet Siberian village infrastructure and transport system. All of the latter impact livelihoods of Siberian Eveny reindeer herders dramatically as they have to quickly draw on available resources and their own expertise to adapt to dramatically changing environmental conditions. The author will examine the ways Eveny observe, perceive and articulate environmental unpredictability, and what cultural and socioeconomic means, resources and knowledge they put in use and devise to survive hazardous situations in the high mountains of Upper Verkhoyanie range in Northeast Siberia.