

THE FORESTS WITHIN AND THE BRAINS WITHOUT: ALTERNATIVE HEURISTICS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE.

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Abstract:

“The Anthropocene seems to arrive just as a whole new series of materialisms, vitalisms, realisms, and inhuman turns require ‘us’ to think about what has definite and forceful existence regardless of our sense of world.” (Colebrook 2017)

Brains and forests are examples of sites where multiple formulations of our possible futures have flourished in recent centuries: many theoretical attempts, and rich poetical metaphors, bring together these living systems. Such metaphors have emerged since the beginning of modern science, casting converging technoscientific perspectives: neurons once appeared as trees to the naturalists, charting the way toward interventions, not only to heal but also to understand and naturalize psychological knowledge —Cajal spoke of “cultivation” when referring to the growth of the neurological forest toward adulthood — tame certain emotions, and possibly augment the cognitive powers of human beings. Thinking with forests (Kohn 2013), with fungi (Tsing 2015, Sheldrake 2020) or with bacterias (Hird 2009), with others grasped in the entirety of ecosystems, might facilitate not only the preservation of specific ecologies, but also the harnessing of their vital power, aimed at helping humanity stabilize the climate, or heal certain diseases. This panel seeks to engage with both the real and the metaphorical dimensions of relationships such as those between forests and brains, for which a “metaphysics of mixture” could be a pregnant notion (Coccia 2018).

Mapping out the topological features of brain materials at every scale has prospered within the framework of the connectome project, envisioning a complete understanding of the network properties and the functions of the human brain (Rose & Abi-Chaid 2013). Meanwhile, our knowledge of forests and mycelia have given way to urgent reflection on symbiosis and multispecies cohabiting, and on their forms of communication, under the influence of the sciences of information (see Kohn 2013). The field of complexity science has emerged as a blurry-edged attempt to bring together these various material beings under the scrutiny of the same algorithmic models. But the foresters of the brains, the neurosurgeons of the forests, the microbiologists and the fermentations enthusiasts exploring the evolutionary continuities of bacterias and human cells, all insist on navigating and thereby developing specific embodied knowledge about the relations that encompass and inhabit these milieux. In dialogue and in negotiation with the current credo of technoscience, they are committed to an understanding of the more-than-human, or the beyond-human, which builds upon these relations. Anthropologists and ethnographers can help intervene for a future that will bridge the brain, the guts and the forest, not only as an image, but as a living alliance which can be revived.

This is the age for a radical heuristic of the Anthropocene: respecting and knowing the forest within, and conscious and caring for the brains without. Shifting perspective toward a truly decentered view

of human-environment relations must start from current knowledge infrastructures. As such, this panel will be grounded in actual practices and/or experimental ethnographies, which consider how alternative heuristics could combine in playful and unexpected ways. How can we ignite new imaginaries and modes of resistance, working against extractivism and even forms of trans-humanism? This panel invites researchers working at the interface of applied sciences and anthropology, to take seriously the potential of these old ideas and to ground them in their current fieldworks and collaborations.

Key words:

ethnographic ecology, anthropology of knowledge, living material cultures