

More-Than-Human Worlds and Alterecology

Instructor: Dr. Santiago Orrego

Level: Undergraduate (BA)

Credits: 5 ECTS (150 hours total)

Language of Instruction: English

Format: Seminar (2 hrs/week) + Field Lab (1 hr/week)

Cluster: More-Than-Human Worlds and Alterecology

Course Description

This introductory course invites students to engage with the more-than-human dimensions of everyday life. It introduces the foundations of multispecies ethnography and ecological thought, encouraging observation, sensory engagement, and creative documentation as ways to learn to notice coexistence.

Students conduct small field labs that trace ecologies of care, decay, and transformation—attending to how humans, animals, plants, and materials co-compose environments. The semester culminates in The Cabinet of Alterecological Fragments, a collective exhibition that assembles vignettes, maps, and field specimens to render Anthropocene relations visible and sensible.

Learning Objectives

By completing this course, students will be able to:

1. Identify central concepts in multispecies and ecological anthropology.
2. Apply sensory and visual ethnographic techniques to environmental encounters.
3. Describe relations of care, decay, and coexistence in situated environments.

4. Experiment with curatorial and creative formats for representing fieldwork.
5. Reflect critically on ethics and positionality in more-than-human research.

Guiding Questions

- How can ethnography sense ecological interdependence?
- What does care look like across species and materials?
- How can fragments, vignettes, and specimens translate multispecies relations into thought?

Course Structure

Component	Hours	Description
Seminar Sessions	28	Conceptual discussions and close readings on ecological and multispecies ethnography.
Field Labs	28	Guided exercises in observation, documentation, and ecological attunement.
Independent Reading & Fieldwork	74	Readings, short texts, and creative documentation for the Cabinet.
Presentation & Reflection	20	Preparation of collective exhibition and short reflective essay.
Total	150 hours	5 ECTS credits

Assesment

All course assignments grow directly from the weekly seminar discussions and Field Lab activities. Each deliverable is part of a continuous ethnographic and creative process that culminates in the collective exhibition *The Cabinet of Alterecological Fragments*. Throughout the semester, students will move between theoretical readings, sensory fieldwork, and curatorial experimentation—learning to articulate ecological observation as both description and care.

Component	Description	Weight
Field Diary (4 entries)	Four short ethnographic accounts (300–400 words each) derived from Field Lab outputs. Each entry should integrate observation, reflection, and at least one course reading.	25%
Ecology Map or Diagram	A visual and textual project that re-assembles collected field fragments into one interpretive ecology of coexistence. Includes a 500-word commentary on method and ethics.	25%
Cabinet Contribution	One curated fragment (text, image, or sound) accompanied by a 400-word reflection titled <i>What the Field Taught Me about Coexistence</i> . Presented in the collective exhibition.	30%
Participation	Active involvement in seminar discussions, field labs, and peer feedback.	20%

How to Work with the Assessments

- **Field Notebook:** Think of this as your *ecological sketchbook*. Each Field Lab generates a fragment that can later be refined into one notebook entry. Bring printed drafts to class for short peer reviews (Weeks 4 and 6).
- **Ecology Map or Diagram:** Developed iteratively—Week 3 introduces tracing relations, Week 4 focuses on sensory layers, Week 5 translates them into diagrammatic form. A draft will be shared for critique in Week 7.
- **Cabinet Contribution:** In Week 8, select your strongest fragment(s) and edit them for public presentation. Prepare short explanatory labels (max. 50 words each) that contextualize the work and link it to a course concept.

Weekly Schedule

Each week combines a conceptual seminar (2 hours) and an applied field lab (1 hour). Seminars introduce theoretical frameworks and ethnographic debates in multispecies and ecological anthropology. Field Labs translate these ideas into situated practice through observation, mapping, and creative documentation. The semester's rhythm moves from learning to notice to learning to curate—culminating in a shared exhibition.

Week 1 – Ecologies of Attention

Opening note

Before beginning our first discussion and field exercise, we will dedicate part of the session to reviewing the course program together. We will go through its structure, aims, and expectations in detail—clarifying how the seminar, field labs, and assignments connect as well as the process for the final collective exhibition.

Students are expected to have already read the entire syllabus before class and to bring any questions, suggestions, or uncertainties for discussion. The goal is to treat the syllabus as a shared ethnographic artifact—a document we will revisit, modify if needed, and collectively inhabit throughout the semester.

Key Ideas:

Coexistence · Observation · Attunement · Situated ecology

Guiding Questions:

1. How can attention become an ecological method?
2. What does it mean to notice the presence and agency of the nonhuman?

Readings:

- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. (Introduction, 1–18).
- Ingold, Tim. *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*. London: Routledge, 2013. (Ch. 1 “Making”).

Seminar (2 hrs):

- Introduction to the course and discussion of attention as an ecological technique.
- Comparative reading of Tsing and Ingold: coexistence, observation, and the ethnographic gesture of noticing.

Field Lab (1 hr): Learning to Notice the Nonhuman

- **Objective:** Develop sensitivity to multispecies and material presences.
- **Procedure:** Choose a shared ecosystem (e.g., a tree, canal, park, or courtyard). Observe quietly for 45–60 minutes, recording five distinct nonhuman gestures, rhythms, or responses.
- **Output:** Five micro-vignettes (50–100 words each) + location notes.

Week 2 – Care and Maintenance

Key Ideas:

Care · Repair · Decay · Ethics of attention

Guiding Questions:

1. What practices of care sustain ecological coexistence?
2. How can we represent care without romanticizing it?

Readings:

- Puig de la Bellacasa, María. *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More-than-Human Worlds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. (Ch. 1 “Touching Visions”).
- Mol, Annemarie. *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. (Selections on multiplicity and care).

Seminar (2 hrs):

- Discussion on care as an analytical and ethical category.
- Case studies from environmental anthropology and STS.

Field Lab (1 hr): Maintenance Stories

- **Objective:** Document acts of ecological maintenance or neglect.
- **Procedure:** Identify a person or practice engaged in repair (watering, cleaning, composting). Conduct visual and textual documentation of gestures and materials.
- **Output:** 1–2 photographs or sketches + 250-word narrative and short reflection on care as relation.

Week 3 – Sensing the Anthropocene

Key Ideas:

Atmosphere · Affect · Pollution · Scale

Guiding Questions:

1. How do we sense large-scale processes through small, local atmospheres?
2. Can climate and mood be described ethnographically?

Readings:

- Yusoff, Kathryn. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018. (Preface and Ch. 1).

- Stewart, Kathleen. *Ordinary Affects*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. (Selections, 1–15).

Seminar (2 hrs):

- Exploration of the Anthropocene as a felt condition.
- Collective discussion on scale, atmosphere, and affect as ethnographic registers.

Field Lab (1 hr): Mood of the Earth

- **Objective:** Render environmental affect through sensory translation.
- **Procedure:** Spend 45 minutes at a chosen site, focusing sequentially on the five senses. Translate observations into color, metaphor, or movement rather than literal description.
- **Output:** “Climate Mood Map” (text + sketch) + 150-word reflection on translation process.

Week 4 – Multispecies Encounters

Key Ideas:

Symbiosis · Co-presence · Entanglement · Relational ontology

Guiding Questions:

1. How can we write and represent nonhuman lives ethnographically?
2. What does coexistence demand from observation?

Readings:

- Haraway, Donna J. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. (Introduction, 3–42).
- Myers, Natasha. “Unclassifiable Life.” *Environmental Humanities* 12, no. 2 (2020): 321–339.

Seminar (2 hrs):

- Discussion of the emergence of multispecies ethnography and its challenges.
- Reading analysis: Haraway's "becoming with" and Myers's notion of the unclassifiable.

Field Lab (1 hr): Species Biography

- **Objective:** Produce a short life history of a nonhuman actor.
- **Procedure:** Choose an organism (tree, dog, fungus, weed). Observe at two different times; record movements, relations, and transformations.
- **Output:** 300-word species biography with one image or drawing + title.

Week 5 – Rituals of Waste and Transformation

Key Ideas:

Composting · Rot · Value · Material afterlife

Guiding Questions:

1. What can decay teach us about ecological continuity?
2. How do waste practices materialize ethics and economies?

Readings:

- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge, 1966. (Ch. 1).
- Clark, Nigel. *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Dynamic Planet*. London: Sage, 2011. (Selections).

Seminar (2 hrs):

- Discussion on impurity and transformation.
- Case examples of compost, food waste, and urban residue.

Field Lab (1 hr): Tracing Residues

- **Objective:** Follow one discarded material through its transformations.

- **Procedure:** Select an object or organic residue; trace its trajectory (who touches it, where it travels, what it becomes).
- **Output:** Short illustrated log (1 page) + 200-word commentary on material afterlife.

Week 6 – Decolonial Ecologies

Key Ideas:

Cosmopolitics · Relational ontology · Justice

Guiding Questions:

1. How can ecological ethnography attend to epistemic plurality?
2. What does care mean in contested environments?

Readings:

- Stengers, Isabelle. *Cosmopolitics I*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. (Ch. 1).
- Blaser, Mario. “Ontology and Indigeneity: On the Political Ontology of Culture.” *Current Anthropology* 54, no. 5 (2013): 547–568.

Seminar (2 hrs):

- Comparative discussion of cosmopolitical and decolonial ecologies.
- Analysis of Blaser’s notion of ontological conflict.

Field Lab (1 hr): Situated Commons

- **Objective:** Document a community practice of shared ecological care.
- **Procedure:** Visit a communal garden, market, or maintenance site; note forms of cooperation, negotiation, or exclusion.
- **Output:** 400-word ethnographic note + one diagram of relational flows.

Week 7 – Writing and Drawing Ecologies

Key Ideas:

Form as method · Poetics of relation · Representation

Guiding Questions:

1. How does form shape ecological understanding?
2. What happens when writing becomes drawing—or vice versa?

Readings:

- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. (Ch. 2 “The Agency of Assemblages”).
- Stewart, Kathleen, and Lauren Berlant. *The Hundreds*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019. (Selections, 1–40).

Seminar (2 hrs):

Workshop on multimodal writing; discussion of Bennett’s material vitality and Stewart & Berlant’s fragmentary style.

Field Lab (1 hr): Translating a Fragment

- **Objective:** Experiment with multimodal translation.
- **Procedure:** Choose one fieldnote; create two new versions—(1) a visual translation (diagram, collage, sketch), (2) a poetic rewrite (≤150 words).
- **Output:** Three versions compiled on one A4 layout.

Week 8 – The Cabinet of Alterecological Fragments

Key Ideas:

Curation · Care · Public ethnography · Open archive

Guiding Questions:

1. How can we exhibit ecological knowledge without fixing it?
2. What forms of care and curiosity emerge through collective curation?

Readings:

- Myers, Natasha. “Curating the Planthroposcene.” *Environmental Humanities* 12, no. 1 (2020): 1–22.
- Demos, T. J. *Radical Museology and the Decolonial Turn*. London: Sternberg Press, 2023. (Selections).

Seminar (2 hrs):

- Discussion of curatorial ethics and public ethnography.
- Preparation for final exhibition and reflective essay.

Field Lab (1 hr): Cabinet Assembly and Reflection

- **Objective:** Curate ecological fragments for collective presentation.
- **Procedure:** Select two or more fragments from previous work; edit, re-label, and prepare them for display.
- **Output:** Contribution to **The Cabinet of Alterecological Fragments** + 400-word reflection: *What the Field Taught Me about Coexistence*.

Final Output: The Cabinet of Alterecological Specimens

Description

The course culminates in *The Cabinet of Alterecological Specimens*, a collective exhibition and analytical portfolio.

Each student curates 3–4 specimens—texts, images, maps, sound pieces, or small artifacts—each paired with a 75-word label and a 1,000-word essay *On Alterecological Method*.

Purpose

The Cabinet operates as an archive of more-than-human coexistence, foregrounding curatorial, ethical, and imaginative dimensions of ethnographic practice in the Anthropocene.

Public Presentation

Presented as a collective installation or online exhibition, the Cabinet invites audiences to encounter ethnographic fragments as relational propositions for rethinking human and more-than-human futures.