

Anthropology of the Anthropocene: Altereological Methods and Multispecies Futures

Instructor: Dr. Santiago Orrego

Level: MA Seminar + Studio Workshop (advanced; suitable for doctoral participation)

Credits: 6 ECTS (180 hours total workload)

Language of Instruction: English

Format: Seminar (2 hrs/week) + Studio Workshop (2 hrs/week)

Cluster: More-Than-Human Worlds and Alterecology

Course Description

This graduate-level course explores alterecology—an ethnographic, philosophical, and curatorial approach to ecological entanglement in the Anthropocene. It situates multispecies ethnography within feminist, decolonial, and speculative traditions of European Ethnology, asking how methods of care, fabulation, and design might transform environmental thought. Students will experiment with *alterecological methods*—diagramming, mapping, curating, and speculative writing—to explore the politics of scale, representation, and more-than-human coexistence. The semester culminates in The Cabinet of Alterecological Specimens, a collective exhibition and a reflective essay that translates field encounters into analytical and imaginative forms.

Learning Objectives

By completing this course, students will be able to:

1. Situate alterecology within debates in environmental humanities and European Ethnology.

2. Apply feminist, decolonial, and speculative methods to ecological inquiry.
3. Integrate ethnographic, theoretical, and curatorial practices in multimodal research.
4. Critically analyze the politics of scale, temporality, and representation in Anthropocene studies.
5. Design and curate an *alterecological specimen*—an analytical form combining fieldwork, care, and speculation.

Guiding Questions

- How does the Anthropocene reconfigure ethnography's objects, scales, and responsibilities?
- What can alterecology teach us about care, coexistence, and planetary futures?
- How might fieldwork become a curatorial and speculative practice?

Course Structure

Component	Hours	Description
Seminar Sessions	28	Conceptual discussions and close readings on Anthropocene thought, multispecies ethnography, and alterecology.
Studio Workshops	28	Experimental exercises in speculative method, diagramming, and curatorial design.
Independent Reading & Fieldwork	74	Reading, documentation, and project development toward the Cabinet of Alterecological Specimens.
Presentation & Reflection	20	Preparation of collective exhibition and short reflective essay.
Total	150 hours	5 ECTS credits

Assesment

All course assignments grow from the weekly dialogue between theoretical seminars and studio experimentation. Each component builds toward the collective exhibition *The Cabinet of Alterecological Specimens*, integrating fieldwork, theory, and curatorial design.

Component	Description	Weight
Alterecological Notebook (6–8 entries)	Analytical field notes (300–500 words each) tracing ecological encounters, material transformations, or speculative devices. Each must cite at least one course reading.	25%
Speculative Method Experiment	A stand-alone methodological or design intervention (mapping, diagramming, storying) that tests an alterecological approach; includes an 800-word commentary on logic and ethics.	25%
Final Portfolio and Reflexive Essay	Curated Cabinet of Alterecological Specimens (3–4 specimens + 1 000-word essay titled <i>On Alterecological Method</i>).	30%
Participation	Active contribution to seminars, studio critiques, and peer feedback.	20%

How to Work with the Assessments

- **Notebook as Lab:** Use your notebook as an analytical and reflexive laboratory. Each week’s exercise yields a fragment that may be expanded into a specimen later. Bring drafts for peer discussion (Weeks 4 and 6).
- **Speculative Experiment:** Mid-semester, you’ll design a methodological prototype (a diagram, tool, story device, or micro-installation). This tests how alterecology can re-order field relations. Draft presentations occur in Week 7.

- **Final Cabinet:** In Week 8, curate and label your specimens for public presentation.

Write short labels (≤ 75 words each) explaining relations and affects. Accompany them with the 1,000-word essay on *the Alterecological Method*.

Weekly Schedule

Each week alternates between **conceptual seminars (2 hrs)** and **studio workshops (2 hrs)**.

Seminars introduce theoretical and ethical debates around the Anthropocene and multispecies coexistence; workshops translate these debates into experimental and curatorial practice.

Week 1 – Thinking with the Anthropocene

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:

Planetary condition · Scale · Crisis as method

Guiding Questions:

1. What does it mean to do ethnography in the Anthropocene?
2. How do planetary processes become empirical?

Readings:

- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021 (Intro & Ch. 1).
- Latour, Bruno. *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017 (Lectures 1–2).

Seminar (2 hrs):

- Opening discussion on the Anthropocene as an epistemic problem.
- Mapping temporal and scalar shifts in anthropological thought.

Studio Workshop (2 hrs): Planetary Cartography.

Students create a diagram linking personal field sites to planetary processes (carbon flows, migration, water).

Output: annotated diagram + 150-word note.

Week 2 – Feminist and Decolonial Ecologies

Key Ideas:

Situated knowledge · Epistemic justice · Care from below

Guiding Questions:

1. How can care and accountability redefine ecological knowledge?
2. What does decolonial environmental thought look like in practice?

Readings:

- Puig de la Bellacasa, María. *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More-than-Human Worlds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017 (Ch. 3 “Touching Visions”).
- Povinelli, Elizabeth A. *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016 (Intro & Ch. 1).

Seminar:

- Comparative analysis of feminist and decolonial approaches to ecology.

- Discussion on the ethics of care and geontological politics.

Studio Workshop: Ethnography as Care Practice.

Students map an ecology of maintenance in their local context (water, waste, soil).

Output: 1 map + 300-word reflection on care in infrastructures.

Week 3 – Speculative Ethnography and Alterecological Method

Key Ideas:

Speculation · Fabulation · Controlled equivocation

Guiding Questions:

1. Can invention be a form of knowledge?
2. How do we experiment ethically with speculation?

Readings:

- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. “Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation.” *Tipiti* 2 (1) (2004): 3–22.
- Ballester, Andrea. *Aquifers: A Handbook for Ethnographic Speculation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2024 (Intro & Ch. 2).

Seminar:

- Exploration of speculation as a method.
- Discussion of Ballester’s protocols and Viveiros de Castro’s equivocations.

Workshop: Method Prototype I – Speculative Device.

Design a tool (material or conceptual) to mediate a field relation (e.g., smell collector, sound diary, affect grid).

Output: sketch + 300-word proposal.

Week 4 – More-than-Human Infrastructures

Key Ideas:

Entanglement · Maintenance · Infrastructural ecology

Guiding Questions:

1. How do infrastructures mediate coexistence?
2. Where does care leak or persist?

Readings:

- Blok, Anders, and Ignacio Farias, eds. *Urban Cosmopolitics: Agencements, Assemblies, Atmospheres*. London: Routledge, 2016 (Selections).
- Tsing, Anna L., Jennifer Deger, Alder Kellen, and Feifei Zhou, eds. *Feral Atlas: The More-Than-Human Anthropocene*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020.

Seminar:

- Discussion on ecological infrastructures and feral systems.
- How urban and planetary processes intermingle.

Workshop: Alterecological Diagramming.

Translate flows of matter and care into a diagram (linking humans, animals, materials). Output: diagram + 250-word annotation.

Week 5 – Temporalities of Decay and Regeneration

Key Ideas:

Ruination · Compost · Afterlife

Guiding Questions:

1. What does it mean to study life after life?
2. How do temporal ruins become ethical archives?

Readings:

- Stoler, Ann Laura, ed. *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruin-Likeness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013 (Intro pp. 1–35).

- Moore, Jason W., ed. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?* Oakland: PM Press, 2016 (Ch. 1 “Introduction: Anthropocene or Capitalocene?”).

Seminar:

Temporal approaches to waste, decomposition, and capitalist ecologies.

Workshop: Field Exercise – Temporal Layers.

Document an ecological site through three time scales (past use, present condition, and possible future). Output: photo-essay + 250-word narrative.

Week 6 – Curating More-than-Human Relations

Key Ideas: Display · Ethics of representation · Careful classification

Guiding Questions:

1. How can we exhibit ecological relations without dominating them?
2. What is a careful label?

Readings:

- Myers, Natasha. “Curating the Planthropocene.” *Environmental Humanities* 12 (1) (2020): 1–22.
- Harrison, Rodney, and Esther Breithoff. *Afterlives of the Museum: Ethnographic Perspectives on Museum Transformations*. London: Routledge, 2021 (Ch. 3).

Seminar:

Debate on curatorial ethics and careful classification.

Workshop: Label Lab.

Write three distinct labels for one specimen—factual, poetic, and relational—then design a two-panel display mock-up.

Week 7 – Planetary Futures and Alterecological Imagination

Key Ideas: Futurity · Speculative design · Planetary ethnography

Guiding Questions:

1. How can ethnography imagine futures without totalizing them?
2. What does a planetary alterecology look like?

Readings:

- Danowski, Déborah, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. *The Ends of the World*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017 (Selections).
- Demos, T. J. *Radical Futures: The Politics of Art and Climate Change*. London: Verso, 2023 (Intro & Ch. 2).

Seminar:

Theoretical discussion on planetary scale and speculative politics.

Workshop:

Peer critique of Speculative Method Experiments; collective feedback on curatorial drafts.

Week 8 – The Cabinet of Alterecological Specimens

Key Ideas:

Open archive · Reparative curation · Ethnographic afterlife

Guiding Questions:

1. How do we curate life after fieldwork?
2. What forms of care emerge through collective display?

Readings:

- Clifford, James. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988 (Ch. 10 “On Collecting Art and Culture”).
- Demos, T. J. *Radical Museology and the Decolonial Turn*. London: Sternberg Press, 2023 (Selections).

Seminar:

- Final discussion on curation as a method and the afterlife of research.
- Preparation of public presentation.

Workshop: Cabinet Assembly and Reflection.

Students install their specimens, labels, and reflexive texts for the collective exhibition and submit their essay *on the Alterecological Method*.

Final Output: The Field Compendium of Alterecological Fragments

Description

This course culminates in *The Field Compendium of Alterecological Fragments*, an assemblage of multispecies and ecological traces.

Students contribute 3–4 works—short texts, drawings, photographs, or recordings—each contextualized with a label and a 1,000-word reflexive essay *On Fragmentary Ecologies*.

Purpose

The Compendium highlights the fragmentary nature of ecological knowledge, transforming observation and decay into speculative acts of care and coexistence.

Public Presentation

Curated as a hybrid field exhibition—physical or digital—the Compendium foregrounds process, encounter, and unfinished relations within Anthropocene ecologies.