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Missing Bodies:
The Blindness of the Ethnographic Gaze to Non-Human Animal Actors

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Abstract

In this article, I critically examine the anthropocentric attitudes that have historically shaped ethnography, focusing on their influence on key concepts such as researcher, researched agent, culture, and field. These perspectives, which took root during the Age of Exploration in the 15th and 16th centuries as the West grew increasingly fascinated with “the other,” persisted well into the 19th century. Ethnographers like Lewis Henry Morgan, Edward Burnett Tylor, and Johann Jakob Bachofen conceptualized culture as humanity’s dominion over nature. Similarly, the second generation of ethnologists—including Bronisław Malinowski, Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, and Claude Lévi-Strauss—continued to approach their fieldwork through an anthropocentric lens, often neglecting the agency of non-human actors. This article also engages with contemporary critiques informed by posthumanism, veganism and object-oriented ontology, which challenge the entrenched nature-culture dichotomy. Drawing on the works of scholars such as Philippe Descola, Anna Tsing,

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Eduardo Kohn, and Donna Haraway, I advocate for a redefinition of "the field" that includes non-human actors. Transcending anthropocentric boundaries necessitates an ethical and methodological reevaluation of foundational concepts like culture, the field, and the researcher/researched dynamic. It also calls for a broader transformation in interdisciplinary qualitative research practices. By emphasizing the indispensability of multispecies approaches, this article argues for a shift away from anthropocentric research paradigms. Such approaches are essential for achieving a more inclusive and comprehensive ethnographic analysis, one that better reflects the complex interrelations between human and non-human actors.
Keywords: multispecies ethnography, anthropocentrism, non-human species, ethnographic methodology

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Kayıp Bedenler:
Etnografik Bakışın İnsan Olmayan Hayvan Aktörlere Körlüğü

Öz

Bu makalede, etnografyanın tarihsel süreçlerinde yerleşik olan insanmerkezli tutumları incelemekte ve bu yaklaşımların araştırmacı, araştırılan, kültür ve saha kavramlarını nasıl şekillendirdiğini ele alıyorum. 15. ve 16. yüzyılda coğrafi keşiflerle başlayan ve Batı'nın "ötekilere" olan ilgisini tetikleyen bu süreç, 19. yüzyılda Lewis Henry Morgan, Edward Burnett Tylor, Johann Jakob Bachofen gibi etnografların, kültürü insanın doğa üzerindeki hâkimiyeti üzerinden tanımlamalarıyla devam etmiştir. Makalede ikinci kuşak olarak tanımladığım Bronisław Malinowski, Edward E. Evans-Pritchard ve Claude Levi-Strauss gibi etnologların saha çalışmaları sırasında insanmerkezci bir bakış açısının hâkim olduğu görülür. Bu araştırmacılar, sosyal yapıları ve kültürel normları yalnızca insanlar üzerinden anlamaya çalışarak, insan dışı aktörlerin rolünü büyük ölçüde göz ardı etmişlerdir. Makalede aynı zamanda, bu tarihsel çerçeveye dayanarak, posthümanizm, veganizm ve nesne yönelimli ontoloji gibi yaklaşımlar aracılığıyla doğa-kültür ikiliğini sorgulayan çağdaş eleştirilere de yer vermekteyim. Bu bağlamda, araştırmacının "saha" kavramının insan olmayan aktörleri de kapsayacak şekilde genişletmesi gerektiğini iddia ediyorum ve örnek olarak da Philippe Descola, Anna Tsing, Eduardo Kohn ve Donna Haraway gibi araştırmacıların çalışmalarına değiniyorum. Sonuç olarak, insanmerkezci sınırları aşan bir yeniden değerlendirme, sadece kültür, saha ve araştırmacı/araştırılan kavramlarına değil, aynı zamanda disiplinlerarası nitel çalışmalara yönelik etik ve metodolojik zorunluluklar doğurur. Bu makalede, yalnızca geleneksel etnografik yöntemlerin ötesine geçmekle kalmayıp, insanmerkezci araştırma pratiklerinin değişmesi gerektiğini iddia eden çoktürlü yaklaşımların vazgeçilmez olduğunu savunuyorum. Bu yaklaşımlar, daha derinlemesine ve kapsayıcı bir etnografik çalışma için kritik öneme sahiptir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Çoktürlü etnografi, insanmerkezlilik, insan olmayan türler, etnografik metodoloji

1. Introduction

It all began nine years ago when I met Şiir, and our relationship lasted about a year. At the start of high school, the idea of forming a connection with another species seemed unimaginable. Over time, however, as I observed her closely, I noticed both the similarities and differences between her mental states and mine. While she displayed unique attitudes and behaviors, it became clear that she perceived the world in her own distinct way. Although she was free to leave whenever she wished, Şiir chose to stay, and I realized that the bond we shared was unlike any human relationship. Initially, I assumed her presence was purely pragmatic, tied to the provision of food and shelter. Yet, as my affection for her grew, I recognized that she actively responded to my attention and daily routines. Şiir had her own patterns, such as leaving at specific times and interacting with other cats. For instance, she befriended a black cat, whom she would chase and even bring home during rainy days. Her relationship with my mother was equally significant; my mother prepared special meals for her and worried whenever she didn't return at night. One of the most challenging moments for Şiir was losing her three kittens—one was stillborn, and the other two died shortly after birth. For days, she lay motionless in the corner where they had been, barely eating or moving, as if in profound mourning. Despite the black cat waiting outside and meowing for her, she stayed indoors, withdrawn and distant. These experiences transformed my understanding of her, compelling me to see her as more than a subject of human-centered interpretations. I came to recognize her as an independent being with her own agency, existing beyond the simplistic assumptions I had initially projected onto her.

Initially, I interpreted Şiir's actions through a human-centered lens, often asking myself, "How would I feel in this situation?" This anthropocentric perspective led me to frame her behavior as though she were human, inadvertently disregarding her independent agency. Over time, I came to realize the inherent difficulty in acknowledging the autonomous existence of another species without relying on anthropocentric frameworks. While interspecies similarities may occasionally provide valuable insights, relying solely on human-centered comparisons to understand non-human beings is fundamentally flawed. Even so, this approach is arguably preferable to perceiving non-

human animals as mere mechanical entities, as it recognizes their capacity for independent action and intentionality.

The separation from Şiir was deeply painful. During a brief trip out of town, my parents, unwilling to have her around any longer, left her 20–25 kilometers away from home. Although I cannot recall their exact reasoning, their decision was rooted in self-serving motives, which evoked intense anger in me. Şiir was not a disposable object to be cast aside at will; removing her from her familiar home and environment was profoundly unjust. While creating distance from others may sometimes be necessary, forcibly displacing an individual entirely disregards their autonomy and agency. Reflecting on this experience now, I recognize that Şiir, as a member of a different species, was subjected to humanity's dominant position and our frequent tendency to prioritize our own interests over the well-being of others.[2]

During my freshman year at Ankara University (2019–2020), I became deeply engaged with the concept of interspecies equality, which ultimately led me to adopt veganism. I majored in ethnology within the folklore program and pursued a minor in philosophy. In ethnology, I examined how human communities interact with other species, drawing on the works of anthropologists like Philippe Descola and Timothy Ingold, who challenge the conventional human-nature divide. Similarly, in philosophy, thinkers such as Levi Bryant, Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, and Ray Brassier expanded my understanding of human and non-human relations through object-oriented ontology and speculative realism. These two fields—ethnology and philosophy—profoundly shaped my perspective. Ethnology enabled me to observe the human-nature connection through ethnographic fieldwork, while philosophy allowed me to engage with theoretical debates on human existence.

In my second year, I presented a paper on anthropocentric and speciesist research practices at a social science student congress. This presentation critically examined the contributions of classical ethnologists such as Bronisław Malinowski, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Additionally, I introduced the emerging field of multispecies ethnography, highlighting the work of scholars such as Catherine Nash, Andrea Petitt, Alice J. Hovarka, and Ezgi Burgan. Reflecting on this

presentation, I can confidently say that its themes closely align with the ideas explored in this article.

My exploration of interspecies equality is rooted in both academic inquiry and an ethical commitment fostered by my veganism. I actively collaborate with NGOs advocating for animal liberation, participating in protests and delivering presentations on topics such as street animals and factory farming at various events. This activism has, however, drawn criticism from some colleagues, who argue that my close engagement with the subject undermines the ideal of researcher objectivity. They suggest that such proximity might bias my interpretation of data. Yet, I contend that researchers can maintain ethical commitments without compromising academic rigor. Indeed, a strong ethical stance can serve as a source of motivation and intellectual drive. After all, did scholars like Lewis H. Morgan, Bronisław Malinowski, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Philippe Descola not adopt ethical positions in their work? Who could reasonably argue otherwise?

I believe that initiating a paradigmatic shift within a field requires rewriting its history. Just as feminist scholars have crafted their own histories to challenge socio-cultural structures they perceive as masculine, those seeking to transform ethnography must revisit its historical foundations. A historiography of ethnography can demonstrate not only how interspecies ethnographic work is feasible but also why it is essential. This article aims to offer a new historical perspective, exposing ethnography's human-centered and speciesist dimensions. In the first section, I examine the intellectual context in which ethnography emerged, exploring how early generations of ethnologists approached their subjects. The second section addresses the methodological transformations of the 1970s and 1980s, focusing on critiques of hierarchical researcher-researched relationships and innovations in field techniques. The third section turns to early 21st-century posthumanist critiques of Enlightenment dualisms, integrating debates on the "whatness of culture" with analyses of researcher-researched dynamics. Finally, I reflect on the field's position within the triangular relationship of researcher, researched, and culture. Key questions include: How can an anthropocentric discipline

persist? What defines a field? Can interspecies equality be achieved in the context of ethnography? To address these questions, I draw on multispecies ethnography, referencing scholars such as Eben Kirksey, Anna Tsing, Eduardo Kohn, and others who have advanced this approach.[3]

2. A Brief Overview of the History of Ethnography

Beginning in the 15th century with Spanish and Portuguese expeditions to establish new trade routes and expanding with other European nations into the 18th century, the Age of Geographical Discoveries marked the inception of anthropological and ethnographic studies in Europe (Eriksen and Nielsen, 2001: 5–15; Erickson and Murphy, 2021: 11–15). Early ethnographers such as John Ferguson McLennan, Henry J. S. Maine, Johann Jakob Bachofen, and Lewis Henry Morgan shared overlapping interests with explorers like Christopher Columbus, Vasco Núñez de Balboa, Vasco da Gama, and Ferdinand Magellan, who documented the cultures they encountered.[4]

European expansion exposed these researchers to unfamiliar social structures. While local populations were often astonished by the arrival of colonialists, it was the Europeans who experienced a profound cultural shock upon encountering the diverse societies they 'discovered.' Notes from these interactions raised significant questions about social ties, cultural practices, and warfare strategies, illustrating that the pursuit of knowledge during this period was far from purely academic. As Francis Bacon famously asserted, "Knowledge is power," a notion later echoed by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1668). The information gathered in these territories provided strategic advantages for establishing European dominance—after all, how can one control what one does not understand?

Overseas expeditions during this era ignited a "desire for others" among scientists, shifting their focus not only to the social and cultural dimensions of life but also to physiological traits.[5] This fascination culminated in the phenomenon of human zoos, where natives from explored regions were displayed across Europe. By the early 19th century, social scientists such as Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815–1887), Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881), Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), Henry J. S. Maine (1822–1888), John Ferguson McLennan (1827–1881), Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917), Adolph

Bandelier (1840–1914), and James George Frazer (1854–1941)—widely regarded as the first generation of ethnologists—developed influential theories about human nature. These theories often relied on a primitiveness-civilization dichotomy, drawn either from direct observation or from reports provided by travelers and scientists.

Lewis Henry Morgan, who was also a lawyer, investigated the linguistic and legal structures of the Iroquois and Ojibwa in seminal works such as *The League of the Ho-de-no-sau-nee or Iroquois* (1851), *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (1868), and *Ancient Society* (1877). Influenced by thinkers like John Ferguson McLennan (1827–1881), Max Müller (1823–1900), and Charles Darwin (1809–1882), Morgan incorporated their theories to outline stages of social structure (Özbudun, Şafak, Altuntek, 2007: 44–54). In *Ancient Society*, he categorized human history into three broad stages—wilderness, barbarism, and civilization—each further divided into lower, middle, and upper phases (Morgan, 1985). Morgan's view of history as a linear and progressive trajectory reflects a distinctly European emphasis on technological advancement as a marker of civilization. By linking social stages to technological evolution, he laid the foundations for the historical materialist approach, which Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels later expanded upon.

Edward Burnett Tylor, another foundational figure in anthropology, was among the first to formally define culture. In *Primitive Culture* (1871), he described it as a set of laws, morals, customs, arts, and habits acquired by individuals as members of society. Like Morgan, Tylor categorized human societies into three stages: (1) savagery, characterized by hunter-gatherer lifestyles; (2) barbarism, marked by the domestication of plants and animals; and (3) civilization, distinguished by the advent of writing (Özbudun, Şafak, Altuntek, 2007: 55–56). Tylor conceptualized culture as uniquely human, encompassing technology, language, beliefs, and myths. A pivotal aspect of his work was his identification of animistic beliefs among indigenous communities—a concept that resonates with Philippe Descola's Amazonian fieldwork, which critiques the dichotomy between nature and culture. Animism, the belief in reciprocal relationships between humans and soul-bearing entities in nature, was central to Tylor's understanding of culture. Despite their contributions to the field, both Morgan and Tylor reflected the

inquisitive ethos of the Age of Discovery, demonstrating an 'authentic desire for the other.' Their works, while groundbreaking, were framed within the Eurocentric perspectives of their time, prioritizing Western notions of progress and civilization.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, second-generation ethnologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, Franz Boas, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, and Margaret Mead rose to prominence. In 1915, Malinowski embarked on fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands —a trip initially intended to be brief but extended to two years due to the outbreak of World War I. As a native of Austrian-controlled Krakow, he was prohibited from returning to Britain. Between 1915 and 1918, Malinowski conducted a comprehensive monographic study of the Trobrianders, examining various socio-cultural aspects such as trade, family life, and sexuality (Özbudun, Şafak, Altuntek, 2007: 105–106). A key figure in functionalist anthropology, Malinowski argued that culture functions to meet human needs through institutional structures. He proposed that biological needs—such as reproduction, security, and health—find their counterparts in cultural practices. For instance, reproduction is organized within kinship systems, while health needs are addressed through culturally specific hygiene practices (Malinowski, 1992). His emphasis on the autonomy of cultural institutions, which vary independently across societies, significantly influenced the development of cultural relativism[6] in 20th-century ethnology. By highlighting the contrasts between Trobriander and European socio-cultural structures, Malinowski contended that these differences should not be assessed using dichotomous terms such as "good-bad" or "primitive-civilized."

Edward E. Evans-Pritchard is another prominent ethnologist, renowned for his structuralist approach in studying the Azande in Kenya (1926–1930) and the Nuer in Sudan (1930–1936). In contrast to Malinowski's functionalism, Evans-Pritchard advocated for analyzing societies not only through their unique dynamics but also by examining their overarching structural frameworks. While acknowledging cultural diversity, he emphasized shared structural patterns across societies (Özbudun, Şafak, Altuntek, 2007: 128–129). His seminal work on the Nuer explored social structure and kinship through broader societal frameworks and rituals, rather than focusing solely on individual actions (Evans-Pritchard, 1940). Although he embraced aspects of cultural

relativism, Evans-Pritchard sought to identify universal structural principles underlying diverse cultures. Claude Lévi-Strauss expanded this structuralist perspective, arguing that mythology and kinship systems reveal universal structures that underpin all societies. Despite cultural variations, Lévi-Strauss maintained that every society operates according to a shared structural logic (Lévi-Strauss, 1963). He extended structuralist analysis beyond social organization to include cultural elements such as language, mythology, and ritual, offering a deeper theoretical framework for understanding cultural dynamics.

Margaret Mead and Clifford Geertz made distinctive contributions to the study of society and culture, building on the foundations established by Bronisław Malinowski, Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Known for her pioneering work on cultural relativism and gender roles, Mead's fieldwork in Samoa explored how culture shapes individual behavior and reproduces societal norms (Mead, 1928). While she shared Malinowski's functionalist perspective, Mead placed greater emphasis on the individual's role in society and the psychological effects of cultural norms. In contrast, Clifford Geertz viewed culture as a "web of meanings" (Geertz, 1973), prioritizing local interpretations over universal structures. His symbolic anthropology shifted the focus from structural analyses to the ways societies construct and interpret cultural meanings. This perspective diverged from Lévi-Strauss's universal structuralism and Evans-Pritchard's emphasis on social frameworks and rituals. While Malinowski and Mead highlighted cultural relativism and individual agency, Evans-Pritchard and Lévi-Strauss focused on structural elements and universal patterns. Geertz, by introducing symbolic anthropology[7], shifted the focus toward the creation and interpretation of cultural meaning.

In summary, the historical development of ethnography has evolved from the geographical discoveries of the 15th century to the influential theoretical approaches of the 19th and 20th centuries. During the era of geographical discoveries, European travelers and explorers documented the social and cultural structures of the newly encountered lands, laying the foundation for ethnography as a discipline. Early ethnologists such as John Ferguson McLennan, Henry J. S. Maine, and Lewis Henry

Morgan established the theoretical groundwork for studying human societies through the methods they developed. However, these initial studies were shaped by a Eurocentric perspective, often categorizing societies dichotomously as “primitive” and “civilized”. In the early 20th century, scholars like Bronislaw Malinowski, Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, and Claude Lévi-Strauss transcended these reductive frameworks, focusing instead on the internal dynamics and cultural structures of societies. Malinowski’s functionalist approach examined how cultural systems address biological and social needs, while Evans-Pritchard emphasized the formation and maintenance of social structures through kinship relations and rituals. Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist analysis placed these studies within a universal framework, uncovering the structural dynamics underlying cultural patterns and mythologies. Simultaneously, researchers such as Margaret Mead and Clifford Geertz introduced new methodologies, including cultural relativism and symbolic anthropology. Mead explored the role of individuals in shaping societal norms, while Geertz’s concept of “thick description” revolutionized ethnographic methods by advocating for detailed, interpretive analyses of cultural practices (Geertz, 1973). Malinowski’s fieldwork-based ethnography, which emphasized on-site observation, became a cornerstone of modern ethnographic methodology. Together, these interrelated approaches broadened the scope of ethnography, making it a more inclusive and multidimensional discipline. Today, ethnography builds on this rich theoretical heritage and continues to serve as an indispensable tool for understanding the complexities of human societies.

3. A Paradigmatic Break: Position of A Researcher and Researched Agent

Since the mid-20th century, anthropology has undergone significant transformations, increasingly embracing cultural relativism and critically examining researchers' positionalities. Early anthropologists often analyzed societies from an ostensibly “objective” viewpoint, unknowingly projecting their own cultural biases onto their work. Approaches such as postcolonial critique[8] (Asad, 1973) and feminist anthropology[9] (Abu-Lughod, 1991) brought this issue to light, urging researchers to consider how their perspectives influence their findings. Reflexivity thus emerged as a crucial

methodological tool, enabling researchers to critically assess their biases and roles (Clifford & Marcus, 1986).

Bronislaw Malinowski's fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands exemplifies the significance of reflexivity in ethnographic research. Widely regarded as a founder of modern ethnography, Malinowski's fieldwork set a methodological benchmark for the discipline (Malinowski, 1922). However, his posthumously published *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1967) revealed a stark contrast between his publicly objective stance and his private biases. The diary contained, at times, unpleasant and even hateful remarks about the natives, which were omitted from his academic publications. This discrepancy highlights the need to critically evaluate researchers' sincerity in the field and the omissions in scientific reporting, raising questions about their impact on objectivity (Stocking, 1983).

Re-evaluating the researcher's position and their relationship with those they study has become central to modern anthropology. Researchers are now expected not only to report observations but also to reflect on their biases, emotional responses, and social positions. It is increasingly recognized that researchers are active participants in the interaction, simultaneously influencing and being shaped by the research context. This interplay raises critical questions about balancing personal emotions with scientific integrity (Davies, 2008). Reflexivity is no longer viewed merely as a methodological necessity but also as an ethical imperative. Acknowledging one's biases and positionalities is essential for fostering a more transparent and inclusive research process (Reed-Danahay, 1997). This approach promotes honesty and openness, strengthening anthropology's capacity to engage with diverse perspectives.

These methodological innovations in ethnography redefined both the role of the researcher and that of the communities studied. In early anthropology, indigenous peoples were often treated as silent, passive subjects of observation. By the mid-20th century, however, this perspective shifted, recognizing that these communities are active participants with distinct perspectives. In *Time and the Other* (1983), Johannes Fabian explores how anthropology constructs concepts of time and otherness, framing indigenous groups as "the other" and reducing them to research objects. Fabian argues

that anthropologists have historically prioritized Western notions of time, thereby marginalizing other cultures both temporally and socially. This practice has perpetuated an asymmetrical power dynamic between researchers and the communities they study, underscoring the importance of indigenous responses to researchers' presence as indicators of these power imbalances.

The responses of indigenous communities to researchers are crucial for understanding their worldviews, social structures, and perceptions of outsiders. Communities often view researchers not merely as observers but also as participants in their social relationships and power dynamics. Consequently, their attitudes toward researchers reveal broader perspectives on the world and nuanced reactions to external influences. Postcolonial critiques have further emphasized that indigenous peoples are not passive objects of study but active participants who shape the research process. This recognition has prompted a paradigm shift, encouraging researchers to adopt approaches

Indigenous communities' reactions to researchers have ranged from hospitality and cooperation to skepticism and resistance, shaped by cultural norms, prior experiences, and the rapport established by the researcher. Successful ethnographic research depends on mutual understanding and respect. These attitudes are not merely directed toward the observer but also reflect responses to the cultural forces the observer represents, illustrating efforts to defend cultural identities and worldviews. Researchers must carefully consider these reactions, as they significantly influence fieldwork dynamics and the quality of collected data. An example of this complexity can be seen in two photographs taken by Bronislaw Malinowski during his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands. One image (see photo 2) depicts Malinowski seated among the Trobrianders, all gazing directly at the camera -a striking illustration of the mutual awareness between the anthropologist and the community (LSE Library Collections, n.d.). The gaze of the Trobrianders reflects their awareness of the researcher's presence, subtly shaping the anthropological observation itself.

Photo 1. Malinowski sitting with a group of men holding lime pots. (LSE Library Collections)

Photo 2. Bronislaw Malinowski and a Trobriander. (LSE Library Collections)

In the second photograph (see photo 3), a Trobriand native discreetly gazes at the camera (Malinowski, 1992, p. 466), a look that can be interpreted as a form of silent resistance to the researcher's presence. The native's gaze not only reflects their reaction to the observer but also transforms the researcher into an object of observation. This reciprocal gaze underscores the complex, bidirectional dynamics inherent in fieldwork. As Clifford Geertz observed in *Thick Description* (1973), understanding such multi-layered interactions is essential for grasping a culture's meanings. The gaze in these photographs is more than visual communication—it is a manifestation of power relations and interaction.

These two photographs illustrate that the relationship between researcher and researched can be analyzed through visual materials as well as textual accounts. They serve as tangible examples of how communities respond to the researcher's presence and how these responses are integrated into ethnographic analysis. Malinowski's fieldwork, therefore, should not be evaluated solely through his written reports but also through the visual data he produced. These photographs reveal how the natives perceived him and how their reactions shaped the research process. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the photographs were taken by the researcher and are interpreted independently of the perspectives of those photographed. This raises critical questions about representation and prompts reflection on how the natives are portrayed. Beyond mere documentation, these images reveal how theoretical and technical developments in ethnography influence the use of photography and video. Photography not only captures reality but also reflects the photographer's perspective, which may distort that reality. Malinowski's photographs demonstrate how his viewpoint on the Trobrianders shaped his research outcomes, highlighting the dual role of photography as both documentation and a medium of power-laden representation.

4. Transformation of Culture: Human - Nature Distinction

Beyond the relationship between the researcher and the researched, debates on the definition of culture have profoundly influenced the evolution of ethnography. In the late 19th century, pioneers such as Johann Jakob Bachofen, Edward Burnett Tylor, and Lewis Henry Morgan conceptualized culture as a product of human dominance over nature. Bachofen, in *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right* (1967), analyzed matriarchal societies and framed cultural evolution as humanity's means of imposing order on primitive nature. Similarly, Tylor, in *Primitive Culture* (1871), defined culture as a "complex whole," emphasizing humanity's capacity to shape nature through laws, customs, beliefs, and art. Morgan, in *Ancient Society* (1985), proposed a linear model of human progress, categorizing societies into stages of "savagery, barbarism and civilization" portraying culture as the triumph of human reason over nature.

In the early 20th century, the second generation of ethnologists introduced a more nuanced understanding of culture. Scholars such as Bronislaw Malinowski, Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Margaret Mead, and Clifford Geertz rejected the idea of a universal cultural framework, emphasizing instead that each society possesses its own unique structure. This shift gave cultural relativism a pivotal role in anthropology. For instance, Malinowski's functionalism analyzed the Trobriand Islands' social structures based on their internal dynamics (Malinowski, 1922). Evans-Pritchard's studies of the Nuer highlighted the importance of understanding societies within their specific cultural contexts (Evans-Pritchard, 1940). While Lévi-Strauss acknowledged the distinct logic of individual cultures, he also sought to uncover universal mental structures underlying cultural expressions (Lévi-Strauss, 1963). Mead's fieldwork in Samoa demonstrated that gender roles vary significantly across cultures (Mead, 1928), while Geertz's concept of culture as a "web of meanings" emphasized the necessity of interpreting societies through their own values rather than imposing external standards (Geertz, 1973).

The second generation of ethnologists contributed significantly to reducing ethnocentric attitudes by promoting cultural relativism as a critique of Western claims to superiority and affirming the equal value of diverse cultural structures. However, while

these ethnologists opposed racism, they overlooked speciesism, assuming that culture existed solely within human-human relationships. Consequently, the role of human-nature interactions in shaping culture remained largely unexplored, reflecting the anthropocentric limitations of ethnology at the time.

Since the mid-20th century, the Enlightenment-inspired goal of human reason dominating nature has become increasingly pronounced. René Descartes' dualism, which positioned humans as separate from and superior to nature, established a paradigm that divided mind from body and culture from nature. In *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Descartes emphasized rational thought as the defining characteristic of humanity, justifying human control over nature. His principle, "I think, therefore I am," laid the foundation for viewing culture as a reflection of human dominance over nature —an idea deeply embedded in modern science and ethnology.

Throughout much of the 20th century, Cartesian dualism shaped ethnological perspectives, with many researchers regarding human dominance over nature as central to cultural development. By the century's end, however, approaches such as environmental anthropology and ecological determinism began to challenge the nature-culture divide. Anthropologists like Roy Rappaport and Marvin Harris explored how environmental factors influence cultural norms and social structures. Rappaport's *Pigs for the Ancestors* (1968) analyzed how the Maring people of Papua New Guinea adapted to their environment through ritual practices. Similarly, Harris's *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches* (1974) argued that ecological and economic needs drive cultural practices. Meanwhile, scholars such as Philippe Descola and Tim Ingold critically examined the nature-culture dichotomy as a Western construct. In *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2013), Descola emphasized indigenous societies' holistic relationships with nature, contrasting them with Western attitudes. Similarly, Ingold's *The Perception of the Environment* (2000) highlighted how environmental perception shapes human life, suggesting that culture evolves continuously through interaction with nature.

In the early 21st century, debates on the human-nature distinction extended beyond ethnology into philosophy, sociology, cultural studies, and the arts. Movements such as posthumanism, object-oriented ontology (OOO), and veganism advanced critiques of anthropocentric thought, reevaluating human-nature relations.

Posthumanism, a central critique of Enlightenment thought, challenged the notion of human sovereignty over nature and technology. Enlightenment ideals of reason established a paradigm positioning humans as superior to other beings —a worldview often linked to environmental destruction and the reinforcement of species hierarchies. In *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), N. Katherine Hayles examines the human-technology relationship, illustrating posthumanism's key concept of decentering the human. Similarly, Donna Haraway's *The Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) explores the blurred boundaries between humans, animals, and machines, offering a critique of anthropocentric frameworks. In *The Posthuman* (2013), Rosi Braidotti expands on these ideas, arguing that posthumanism integrates humans as part of a larger ecological and technological network, advocating for a sustainable relationship with nature. Together, these works envision a future beyond anthropocentrism, grounded in ethical critiques of its socio-cultural impacts.

Object-oriented ontology (OOO) emerged in the 21st century as a philosophical approach asserting the independent existence of objects. Founded by Graham Harman, OOO posits that objects possess a reality beyond human perception and interpretation. In *The Quadruple Object* (2011), Harman argues that objects hold intrinsic meaning, existing not merely to serve human purposes. Rooted in Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927), OOO builds on Heidegger's exploration of being as distinct from human consciousness. Harman extends this framework, asserting that objects, like humans, have an inherent right to exist. OOO critiques classical philosophy, including Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and G.W.F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). While Kant viewed objects through the categories of human cognition, OOO rejects this anthropocentric lens, asserting that objects exist independently of human perception. Similarly, whereas Hegel's dialectics framed objects within the evolution of human thought, OOO contends that objects retain their reality outside human cognition. Thus,

OOO advocates for understanding objects based on their own ontological values, independent of their utility to humans.[10]

One of the most influential movements of the 21st century is undoubtedly veganism, which critiques anthropocentrism and speciesism by challenging the human-nature divide and advocating for the agency of non-human species. Veganism has gained significant traction as a lifestyle and ethical philosophy, addressing issues such as animal rights, environmental sustainability, and public health. Central to this movement is its opposition to speciesism, asserting that animals deserve the same ethical consideration as humans. Peter Singer laid the philosophical groundwork for veganism in *Animal Liberation* (1975), where he argues that the capacity of animals to suffer is sufficient reason for their inclusion in ethical considerations. Drawing on Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism, Singer emphasizes that suffering, rather than intelligence or utility, should be the basis for ethical evaluation. Similarly, Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983) posits that animals possess intrinsic value and therefore deserve equal ethical status with humans. Regan critiques speciesist approaches that devalue animals as ethically inferior. In *Animals as Persons: Essays on the Abolition of Animal Exploitation* (2008), Gary Lawrence Francione extends these arguments, advocating for the complete abolition of animal exploitation. Francione contends that animals should be regarded as ethical beings, not as resources for human use. By opposing speciesism and anthropocentrism, veganism redefines the human relationship with nature and non-human life, highlighting the environmental and social consequences of animal exploitation.

The concept of culture has undergone significant transformation throughout the history of ethnology. Initially, Western thought framed culture as a product of human dominance over nature. By the mid-20th century, however, perspectives such as environmental anthropology and ecological determinism began to emphasize nature's role in shaping culture, challenging anthropocentric assumptions and expanding the understanding of culture beyond human-exclusive frameworks.

In contemporary discourse, movements like posthumanism, object-oriented ontology (OOO) and veganism advocate for redefining culture as a phenomenon that extends beyond human agency. Posthumanism critiques human dominance over nature and technology, while object-oriented ontology posits that objects exist independently of human perception. Veganism, in turn, challenges speciesism by reevaluating the ethical status of animals. This expanded view acknowledges that culture encompasses non-human agents, calling for a rethinking of cultural processes beyond anthropocentric boundaries. Ethnology and related social sciences now increasingly recognize culture as intricately linked to non-human beings, reflecting a profound transformation in both scientific and ethical perspectives.

5. The Transformation of The Field: The Multispecies Ethnography

In ethnology, discussions about the researcher-researched relationship and the definition of culture have traditionally grounded the discipline. However, questions about what constitutes an ethnographic field have become increasingly central. Historically, the field has been conceptualized as a space for analyzing human experiences and social relations. Recent critiques of the researcher's role and positioning have exposed the anthropocentric bias underlying the definition and selection of ethnographic fields. This human-centered focus has limited the scope of ethnography, often excluding other species, ecosystems, and non-living entities. To address this limitation, multispecies ethnography redefines the field as a shared space where diverse species coexist and interact. By expanding fieldwork beyond human relationships to include animals, plants, and other life forms, this approach aims to capture the complexity of interspecies interactions and shared life experiences.

Multispecies ethnography has emerged as a transformative approach in 21st-century anthropology, extending the scope of ethnographic study to include other species. This perspective seeks to understand the interdependencies and interactions between humans and nonhumans. Anthropologist Eben Kirksey, a key figure in this field, has

significantly contributed to its development. His edited volume, *The Multispecies Salon* (2014), brings together foundational studies on the roles of nonhuman actors in social and ecological systems. Multispecies ethnography has also gained traction across disciplines. Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2021) examines the economic, ecological, and cultural connections between humans and matsutake mushrooms, situating human-mushroom interactions within broader ecosystems. Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet* (2008) explores human-animal relations, focusing on dogs, and addresses the ethical, political, and ontological dimensions of interspecies interactions. Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think* (2013) critiques anthropocentric assumptions by analyzing how Amazonian ecosystems foster meaning-making processes among various life forms. Through these works, multispecies ethnography redefines ethnographic boundaries by integrating nonhumans into social and ecological analysis.[11] By moving beyond anthropocentrism, it offers a holistic perspective on the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman relationships within complex social systems.

The methodology of multispecies ethnography for meaningfully engaging with other species remains underdeveloped, presenting significant challenges for researchers striving to transcend anthropocentric approaches. Kirksey and Helmreich (2010) emphasize a key issue: the reliance on human-centered linguistic and methodological tools, which fail to adequately capture nonhuman experiences. Similarly, Cary Wolfe (2003) critiques anthropocentric language, asserting that it is incapable of conveying the subjectivities of animals and other nonhumans. This limitation reinforces speciesism by framing nonhuman entities as existing solely for human benefit. This lack of representation in media and education further marginalizes nonhuman experiences, perpetuating anthropocentric worldviews. Melanie Joy (2010) addresses the societal impact of speciesism through her concept of "carnism", critiquing the normalization of certain animals as consumables while excluding others from this category. Joy advocates for addressing speciesism not only through raising awareness but also

through implementing legal reforms to support interspecies equality and foster more inclusive representations of nonhuman beings.

This theoretical framework provides a critical roadmap for advancing multispecies ethnography. The representation crisis poses both a barrier to understanding nonhuman experiences and an opportunity to develop more inclusive ethnographic methodologies. Addressing this crisis requires not only recognizing other species but also reevaluating humanity's role in relation to them. Efforts to engage with nonhuman beings risk reinforcing hierarchical power dynamics if they fail to critically assess human impact. Multispecies ethnography seeks to position humans within the broader spectrum of species, encouraging a reassessment of humanity's limitations.[12] However, focusing solely on recognizing other species without interrogating humanity's influence risks perpetuating existing hierarchies. The ultimate challenge lies in dismantling these structures, rethinking humanity's role in nature, and opening new avenues for the field. While not all forms of anthropocentrism are inherently problematic, its speciesist manifestations -which presume human superiority- sustain domination over nature and nonhumans. When grounded in ethical and ecological responsibility, anthropocentrism can offer valuable insights into human relationships with other species. Multispecies ethnography endeavors to overcome harmful anthropocentric perspectives by challenging speciesist hierarchies and redefining human-nonhuman relations.[13]

6 . Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion

As demonstrated throughout this article, researchers in ethnology and anthropology have historically proposed various claims regarding the ideal researcher, the nature of culture, the identity and responses of the researched, and crucially, the boundaries of the research field itself. While my aim is not to impose rigid categorizations on the historical development of the discipline, this exploration seeks to uncover the anthropocentrism that has excluded nonhuman species from ethnographic considerations. The purpose here is not to confine the discipline or its practitioners to predefined categories but to critique the speciesist biases that have shaped its scope and focus.

I must admit that writing this article was not an easy task. It stems from a sense of responsibility to address the speciesism embedded in ethnology—a discipline that has historically positioned humans and human-related phenomena as central and dominant. While the contributions of classical researchers, several of whom have been discussed in this article, are invaluable and have profoundly influenced the social sciences, there is an urgent need to reframe the discipline to address its anthropocentric limitations. Multispecies ethnography, as proposed here, does not aim to undermine the classical ethnographic tradition but to build upon it by incorporating nonhuman perspectives into the field. I firmly believe that meaningful change and transformation can only emerge by engaging with and expanding the strengths of this foundational tradition.

Although this article focuses on ethnologists to maintain a narrow scope, every social science researcher engaged in fieldwork must confront their blindness toward nonhuman actors. This blindness reduces these actors to "missing bodies." As long as researchers fail to acknowledge these missing bodies in the field, their absence will manifest as negative reflections within social structures. For instance, if a researcher neglects to consider a dog, horse, cow, or cat as an active participant in their fieldwork —failing to observe the relationships these beings form with their environment, their own species, and humans— readers who navigate social structures in their daily lives will similarly remain unaware of the agency of these nonhuman actors. This lack of recognition —this "witnesslessness"— facilitates the exploitation, abuse and marginalization of nonhuman beings wherever social interactions occur.[14] As this demonstrates, the social role of the researcher is far from insignificant in its potential to influence and transform everyday practices. When researchers, through their fieldwork, examine and document the agency of nonhuman actors, highlighting how these beings form networks of relationships both within their own species and with others, they contribute to a paradigm shift. Such a shift could pave the way for a future in which the exploitation of animals is significantly reduced or even eradicated. Urban planners and residents might gain a better understanding of the suffering endured by animals struggling to survive in urban

environments, leading to actionable solutions to support these beings. Similarly, medical professionals who use laboratory animals might develop a deeper awareness of suffering as a universal experience, recognizing that the animals under their care possess lives and emotions of their own. These professionals might also reconsider practices such as isolating calves from their mothers or subjecting chicks to brutal deaths, reflecting on how such acts sever animals from the intimacy of their species and other forms of companionship. In summary, moving beyond an exclusive focus on human-human relationships allows for a deeper exploration of the dynamics between humans and other species. Such a shift has the potential to address the disconnect between humans and the broader universe in which we live -an alienation perpetuated by speciesist and anthropocentric conceptions of culture.

This journey, which began with Şiir, has convinced me that interspecies communication and understanding the lives of nonhuman species are essential for fostering awareness of humanity's interconnectedness with the world we inhabit. After all, what is the ultimate purpose of being a researcher? Is it not to improve living conditions for humans while establishing ethical boundaries that also encompass nonhuman species? Ethnology, along with other social sciences that rely on empirical studies, has played a pivotal role in shaping the current paradigm. Even philosophy, once regarded as "the art of discussing concepts with concepts", has increasingly incorporated empirical methods into its inquiries.

It is therefore imperative for every social scientist —whether philosophers, sociologists, historians, psychologists, economists, or legal scholars— to recognize and include the "missing bodies" in their workOnly by doing so can humanity transcend its speciesist selfishness, better understand its place within the broader world, and resist falling prey to anthropocentric grand narratives. The vision of a more inclusive and ethical world —one I glimpsed through my relationship with Şiir— is not merely a poetic aspiration but a tangible reality that must eventually be realized.

Endnotes

[1] This study is an extended version of the paper titled "Missing Faces: The Blindness of the Ethnographic Gaze to Non-Human Actors" presented at the VI. International Congress on Critical Debates in Social Sciences organized by Izmir Democracy University on 4-5 November 2023.

[2] Dear reader, I conclude the personal account of my relationship with Şiir here. In the following sections, you will encounter the academic dimensions of our interspecies bond. Şiir remains ever-present in my reflections on interspecies relationships, though she likely never imagined being remembered in this way. I do not know if she is still alive after nine years, as the lives of stray cats like Şiir are often tragically short on the streets of Turkey. Countless others like her fall victim to cars, disease, attacks, or speciesist policies. The streets we perceive as their freedom are, tragically, also their graves—graves upon which our cities are built.

[3] Although this study primarily focuses on non-human animals, it is important to acknowledge that the broader scope of multispecies ethnography extends beyond animals to include plants and other forms of non-human life. In this context, the 'Plant Turn' underscores the agency of plants and their significant role in multispecies interactions. Notable contributions to this field include the works of Stefano Mancuso (2019), Robin Wall Kimmerer (2003, 2013), Daniel Chamovitz (2012), and, from Turkey, Nihan Bozok's study (2024) on multispecies companionship in the Aegean forests.

[4] For further reading on the history of the general and subfields of the discipline, see the following references: M. Harris, 1968; T. Asad, 1974; D. H. Hymes, 1983; J. Clifford and G. Marcus, 1986; G. W. Stocking, 1988, 1992; A. Barnard, 2011; M. R. Dove, 2014.

[5] I recommend Gerard Badou's *Venus of Hotanto*, an anthropological work that recounts the tragic story of Saartjie Baartman, a young woman born and raised in South Africa. Baartman was objectified and aestheticized for her large hips and genitalia, ultimately sent to Europe by Dutch colonists to be exhibited as a spectacle. After her death, her body was taken and analyzed by French scientist Georges Cuvier, then mummified and displayed in the Paris Museum. Decades later, in the 1990s, former South African President Nelson Mandela, along with other activists, demanded the return of her remains to South Africa. In response, the French National Assembly voted to repatriate Baartman's body, allowing her to finally receive a proper burial. Additionally, I recommend watching the award-winning film *Venus Noire* by Abdellatif Kechiche, which powerfully dramatizes Baartman's life and the systemic injustices she endured.

[6] Cultural relativism posits that a culture's beliefs, norms, and practices should be evaluated only within its own context, without applying external value judgments or universal criteria. This approach requires researchers, particularly in ethnographic studies, to set aside their own cultural biases and understand the studied culture through its own logic and meanings. Bronislaw Malinowski's work in the Trobriand Islands exemplifies this approach, as he analyzed the Trobrianders' social structures and beliefs within their cultural framework, avoiding Western concepts. His work marked a pivotal moment in emphasizing cultural relativism in ethnography. Alongside Malinowski, Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead also made significant contributions to the early development of cultural relativism.

[7] Symbolic anthropology is a branch of anthropology that examines symbols and their meanings to gain a deeper understanding of human cultures. This approach posits that cultural practices and rituals not only reveal social structures but also provide insight into how people perceive and interpret the world around them. One of the most notable contributions to this field is Clifford Geertz's analysis of cockfighting in Bali. In this study, Geertz demonstrates that cockfights are far more than mere entertainment; they serve as a rich 'text' reflecting how Balinese men construct their social identities and navigate power dynamics (Geertz, 1973). Symbolic anthropology emphasizes the importance of exploring symbols and their meanings as a pathway to understanding cultures in depth. Unlike approaches that focus solely on social structures, this perspective also prioritizes individual experiences, and the meanings individuals ascribe to those experiences. In addition to Geertz, other prominent figures in symbolic anthropology include Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, and David Schneider, who have significantly contributed to the development of this field.

[8] For further readings on postcolonial criticism, see: Asad, 1973; Said, 1978; Fanon, 1961; Spivak, 1988; Clifford, 1988; Hall, 1990; Bhabha, 1994; McClintock, 1995; Appadurai, 1996; Cooper and Stoler, 1997.

[9] For further readings on feminist anthropology, see: Ortner, 1972; Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974; Rubin, 1975; Reiter, 1975; Leacock, 1981; Ortner & Whitehead, 1981; Strathern, 1988; Butler, 1990; Abu Lughod, 1993; Visweswaran, 1994. Feminist anthropology has played a pivotal role not only in transforming classical ethnography but also in opening new pathways for multispecies ethnography. For example, Katharina Schneider (2013) demonstrates the contributions of feminist perspectives in multispecies contexts by examining the roles of pigs, fish, and birds in Melanesia.

[10] The work of sociologist Bruno Latour has been instrumental in expanding the understanding of objects' agency within the social sphere. Latour's ideas share some parallels with Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), but there are also significant differences between these two approaches. In his Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Latour assigns active roles to objects—nonhuman entities—in social processes, arguing that they can be as influential as humans. In this respect, his perspective aligns with OOO, which acknowledges the ontological independence of objects. However, unlike OOO, which posits that objects possess a reality entirely independent of humans, Latour asserts that the agency of objects can only be understood within a specific network of relationships (Latour, 2007). His approach emphasizes the role of objects in the networks they inhabit and interact with, rather than focusing on their standalone ontological status.

[11] In addition, researchers such as Catherine Nash (2020), Andrea Petit (2022), Alice J. Hovorka and Martha Geiger (2015), Maura Finkelstein (2022), Irus Braverman (2023), Piers Locke (2013), Semra Özlem Dişli (2022, 2023), Ezgi Burgan (2017, 2023), John Hartigan (2020), and Theresa L. Miller (2019) have also made significant contributions to the development of multispecies ethnography.

[12] I believe that a researcher's recognition of the values inherent to their own species during encounters with other species, and their inclusion of these reflections in their reports, can be achieved through a reflexive ethnographic writing methodology. Furthermore, I argue that adopting an autoethnographic approach -where the researcher makes themselves the subject of study to explore human-animal relationships- can offer significant contributions toward addressing speciesism and anthropocentrism.

[13] Multispecies ethnography, while primarily focusing on the interactions between humans and non-human living beings, also has the potential to expand its scope to include inanimate entities. Scholars like Bruno Latour (2007) and Jane Bennett (2010) argue that objects possess agency and have socio-cultural impacts. This perspective suggests that the methodology of multispecies ethnography could eventually extend to analyze the agency of materials such as plastics, winds, or other non-living entities, redefining the boundaries of ethnographic inquiry.

[14] The position of nonhuman actors in the social sphere has been the subject of critique from various perspectives. Consider, for example, the victimization and suffering of cats and dogs struggling to survive in urban environments; the profit-driven animal farms where chickens are deprived of agency through the use of hormones and antibiotics, and male chicks are brutally disposed of in meat grinders; the entertainment industry, where animals are confined to iron cages for public display; the use of experimental animals in the cosmetics and pharmaceutical industries, subjected to extensive testing; and the killing of animals for leather production in the textile industry. These examples underscore the widespread exploitation of nonhuman beings across various sectors of human activity.

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