

Why Do We Value Diversity? A Cross-Disciplinary Workshop on Biocultural Diversity in Global Con-

Rachel
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Sponsors: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, LMU Munich, Germany

Conveners: Gary Martin (Global Diversity Foundation / RCC), Diana Mincyte (New York University / RCC), and Ursula Münster (LMU Munich / RCC)

Participants: Kojo Amanor (University of Ghana, Legon), Kate Brown (University of Maryland Baltimore County), Katherine Gibson (University of Western Sydney), Zsuzsa Gille (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign), Michael Hathaway (Simon Fraser University), Karen Hébert (Yale University), Myra J. Hird (Queen's University), Eben S. Kirksey (City University of New York), Cheryl Lousley (Lakehead University), Gary J. Martin (Global Diversity Foundation/RCC), Diana Mincyte, (New York University/RCC), Anne Milne (University of Guelph, Canada/RCC), Daniel Münster (Halle University), Ursula Münster (LMU/ RCC), José Augusto Pádua (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro), Shiho Satsuka (University of Toronto), Spencer Schaffner, (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign), Kevin St. Martin (Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey), Anna Tsing (University of California, Santa Cruz)

Hosted by the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, “Why Do We Value Diversity?: A Cross-Disciplinary Workshop on Biocultural Diversity in Global Context” examined the concept of biocultural diversity and explored the social, cultural, political, economic, and ecological implications of its definitions and uses. Seventeen scholars with diverse disciplinary backgrounds in anthropology, literary studies, geography, history, and sociology, as well as two invited discussants came together from nine countries to reflect on the concept of biocultural diversity—currently one of the key concepts employed in a number of scholarly fields and advocacy practices including community development, conservation science, sustainability, food sovereignty, human rights, democratic citizenship, cultural survival, and transformative education, just to name a few. The workshop was envisioned as a space for an open dialogue, enabling a cross-disciplinary exploration of biocultural diversity and its relationship to other fields; it was guided by selected readings, as well as 1,000 word position papers and responses written by participants, which were circulated prior to the meeting. In each of the workshop’s sessions, three discussants commented on an ensemble of two or three papers, followed by a general discussion and summary responses by the authors of the papers.

CHRISTOF MAUCH opened the conference by welcoming participants and introducing the work and vision of the Rachel Carson Center. This was followed by introductory remarks from the conveners, **GARY J. MARTIN, DIANA MINCYTE,** and **URSULA MÜNSTER** who explained how the idea of conducting a

workshop on biocultural diversity came into being. They emphasized that the workshop should be a space where the concept of biocultural diversity could be discussed in all of its theoretical ramifications without being merely reduced to its applications by practitioners.

In the first session, “Markets, Commodities, Values and Economies,” **MYRA HIRD, SHIHO SATSUKA,** and **DIANA MINCYTE** discussed the papers of **KATHERINE GIBSON, ZSUZSA GILLE** and **JOSE PERALTA,** and **KAREN HÉBERT.** Questions about the value of diversity (economic, ethical, aesthetic or spiritual), about different kinds of diversity and about the relationship between “diversity” and “difference” were stimulated by this set of papers. **KATHERINE GIBSON** contributed her notion of “economic diversity” to the concept of biocultural diversity and cautioned about valuing economic diversity as an unquestioned good. In the diverse economy framing, diversity is often assumed to be an emancipator and an alternative to the homogenizing forces of global capitalism. Yet, as practices like “child slavery, indentured labor, theft and feudal tenancy,” can also form part of “diverse economies,” she implored the group to think about “ethical negotiations around diversity and their effects.”

ZSUZSA GILLE, in her co-authored paper with **JOSE PERALTA,** offered a good example for exploring the question of what kinds of diversity are to be supported and what dynamics of development can be articulated in order to do so. While they maintain that GMO varieties of corns in Mexico have negatively impacted the environment by disrupting biological diversity and destroying the region’s “socio-material assemblage” of human- and non-human networks, nevertheless the authors argued that the Mexican government, Monsanto and some farmers see value in GMO corns. In their view, genetically modified corn creates “differences in productivity” and “competitiveness in the market” and thus even an expansion of corn “diversity.”

Focusing on the relationship between “diversity” and “difference,” **KAREN HÉBERT** dealt with ways in which social forms of salmon fishing in the Bristol Bay region of southwest Alaska are intertwined with the “material particularities” that constitute the fishery’s diversity and difference. She pointed out that even though there are various kinds of relations and “modes of work” entangled in the commercial fishing operations of the region, they are “heterogeneous yet common in their alterity”: they all depend on the unpredictable nature and variability of wild salmon. She concluded with the question of what kind of “diversity” is translated into “difference,” as a source of value production in the competitive global seafood market.

In the first afternoon session “Biocultural Becomings, Ontologies, and the Body,” **MICHAEL HATHAWAY, JOSÉ AUGUSTO PÁDUA,** and **ANNE MILNE** discussed the papers of **MYRA J. HIRD** and **EBEN S. KIRKSEY.** Both authors stressed the importance of incorporating non-human, interspecies relations, and even bacteria and microbes into reflections on biocultural diversity. **MYRA J. HIRD’s** research aimed at developing a “microontology of sociable life on Earth,” an “ethnic of vulnerability” that recognizes the notion of the social as “composed of a heterogeneous multitude of entities,” where humans and non-humans play unequal parts. She argued that most relations in the world’s biosphere take place both without recognition and independent of human input, and yet our biosphere could not do without them. As a consequence, her work aspired to re-think Western nature-culture bifurcations.

Engaging with multispecies encounters and new biocultural developments in the Anthropocene was the suggestion that **EBEN S. KIRKSEY** gave in order to expand the notion of biocultural diversity. Instead of confining this concept to the “savage slot,” as if it pertains only to indigenous cultures, he maintained that humans should be following the example of eco-artists and examine the often disrupted hybrid cultures and natures that emerge in the “aftermath of disaster in blasted landscapes.” Studying these creative outcomes of multispecies contact zones will point towards possibilities of “biocultural hope,” he stated.

The afternoon’s “ethnobotany break” served to present some of the diversity of Moroccan, German and North American foodways. As examples for food sovereignty and dietary diversity, participants had brought some food of their own food traditions (Moroccan olives, sweets, Estonian chocolate, Bavarian bread, pretzels, jam and cheese as well as German and North American honey) and gave a short explanation of its cultural context.

The second session of the afternoon, “Power, Conservation, and the Politics of Biocultural Diversity” dealt with various contexts and landscapes of natural and cultural co-production, and also gave ethnographic examples of how local manifestations of biocultural diversity are re-interpreted within national and international constructions of natural areas and anthropogenic landscapes. **GARY J. MARTIN, EBEN S. KIRKSEY,** and **KAREN HÉBERT** discussed the papers written by **KOJO AMANOR, URSULA MÜNSTER,** and **SHIHO SATSUKA.**

Contrasting notions of the environment as stable equilibriums with the newer idea of a non-equilibrium model, **KOJO AMANOR** argued that the disruption of forests in Ghana can result in higher diversity. Additionally, he pointed towards problematic outcomes of allegedly democratic and egalitarian forms of conservation, revealing them as “neo-liberal, macro-environmental strategies” that reflect “particular forms of political and bureaucratic culture,” and might further constrain people and lead to new exclusions.

URSULA MÜNSTER stressed that the concept of biocultural diversity might serve to reinscribe the binary logic of nature/culture in the forests of Waynad, Kerala, South India. In a region where fortress conservation continues to be seen as the only way to save endangered species, she expresses concerns that the adoption of the biocultural model might actually lead to essentializations, homogenization, traditionalization, and the “eco-incarceration” of indigenous Adivasis, and confining them to live a sustainable lifestyle, while the rest of the world continued as usual. Instead of an “easy biocultural continuum” and a productive multispecies interrelation, the forests have fortified boundaries and appear more like a human-animal “war zone,” so the applicability of the concept of biocultural diversity seems questionable.

SHIHO SATSUKA, on the other hand, offered an example of how the agrarian landscape encompassed by the Japanese satoyama forest serves as “model” for a harmonious hybrid between natural and cultural diversity, of “traditional ecological knowledge” and “science.” She claimed that biocultural diversity is a concept that undergoes translations, adaptations and negotiations as it travels. In contrasting the Satoyama Initiative,

sponsored by the Japanese government to establish a model to “enhance the harmony between humans and nature” with the Matsutake Crusaders, a grassroots citizens’ movement that insists on “local specificity and difference,” she demonstrated how concepts like biocultural diversity can be appropriated in diverse ways in “the political struggle among different knowledge systems to claim legitimacy.”

The second day of the workshop started with a short discussion on the key concepts and the recurrent themes that had emerged in the previous day’s discussion. **GARY J. MARTIN** led the discussion and recorded these terms on the board. Entitled “Borderlands, Hybridity, and Contamination,” the first morning panel then focused on the position papers by **ANNA TSING**, **KATE BROWN**, and **SPENCER SHAFFNER**. Discussants for this panel were **URSULA MÜNSTER**, **CHERYL LOUSLEY**, and **KOJO AMANOR**.

ANNA TSING’S paper developed two notions—slow disturbance and contaminated diversity—that, working in tandem, defined pathways to the worlds that humans would like to inhabit. Starting with the Anthropocene and a recognition of “widespread human disturbance,” Tsing defined the notion of contaminated diversity as a “collaborative adaptation to human-disturbed ecosystems.” Slow disturbance, Tsing argued, referred to “anthropogenic ecologies in which many other species [could] live” and which was a process that nurtured interspecies collaborations. In connecting these terms to biocultural diversity, Tsing suggested opening biocultural diversity to contamination by including people from many circumstances as well as different species.

Building on her research in the Chernobyl Zone of Alienation, **KATE BROWN** explored contradictions surrounding the emergence of a preserve teeming with wildlife that replaced the irradiated environments of the nuclear disaster. Brown’s paper traced the history of the Pripjat region where “no two villages were alike” through the Soviet demographic purges of the thirties and forties that produced mono-cropped populations and “biologically depleted flora and fauna.” Brown suggested that the violent turn of events following the Chernobyl nuclear disaster struck another blow to this landscape by transforming it into an “irradiated terrain” with “worrisome diversity of radioactive isotopes that will continue to regenerate in the future.”

SPENCER SCHAFFNER’S paper examined attempts by some scholars to quantify diversity data and warned against two potential forms of misalignment in the emerging biocultural framework. In reflecting on efforts that mapped the diversity of human populations on biological data, Schaffner called for “more sophisticated taxonomic calibrations” where ethnicity and species did not become conflated. Schaffner pointed out that equating different species of plants and animals with different races of humans had a long and troubling history; as, for example, was the case with the environmental management based on racist and anti-immigrant sentiments. Additionally, Schaffner suggested that conflating different strategies in environmental management practices and cultural diversity policies could potentially lead to constructing superabundant individuals as expendable.

The second morning panel, “Biocultural Diversity on the Map and From Below,” featured papers by **KEVIN ST. MARTIN, MICHAEL HATHAWAY,** and **DIANA MINCYTE.** Discussants included **DANIEL MÜNSTER, KATHERINE GIBSON,** and **SPENCER SCHAFFNER.**

KEVIN ST. MARTIN's paper started with a discussion of the geopolitics of biocultural diversity. By referring to a concept of “cartographic silences,” St. Martin argued that biocultural diversity maps not only highlighted the hot spots of diversity, but also made the homogeneity of other places acutely visible, as demonstrated by the white zones of the North, desert regions, and oceans. Additionally, in these maps, biocultural diversity seemed to have been relegated to places that were outside of the reach of capitalism and modernity. In presenting a case of local marine management systems by the Norwegian Samis, St. Martin argued that biocultural mapping projects should “leave room for those diverse peoples and ecologies, which are not mapped, imagined, or yet performed.”

In examining how diversity entered the public sphere in China, **MICHAEL HATHAWAY** questioned its emergence as a social category and political project. Hathaway's project showed that biocultural diversity operated within politicized spheres, a fact that was often obscured in celebratory diversity frameworks. In the case of China, which has presented itself as a strong state, the recognition of the existence of numerous ethnic groups could not only be regarded as a scientific fact, but must also be understood as a “threatening reminder of a non-unified state” as well as a potentially inflammatory issue opening contestations over land and natural resources.

DIANA MINCYTE's project explored the limits of using Geographic Indications as market-based methodologies for protecting biocultural diversity. In examining the case of diverse dumplings in Lithuania, Mincyte's project examined the failure to apply GIs in the large swaths of post-socialist East Europe as a case of the emergence of biocultural diversity's Other, the monotonous, non-diverse territories, and gray zones in maps of global diversity. Mincyte argued that the project of biocultural diversity conservation not only marketized tradition, history, and place, but also rested on the commodification of difference by placing it in the geopolitical hierarchies.

Entitled “Policy and Conceptualizations in Biocultural Diversity,” the afternoon panel discussed papers by **GARY J. MARTIN, CHERYL LOUSLEY,** and **JOSÉ AUGUSTO PÁDUA. KEVIN ST. MARTIN, KATE BROWN,** and **ANNA TSING** commented on the papers.

The panel started with a discussion of **GARY J. MARTIN's** paper, focusing on the limits of current models of community conservation. In examining the place of biocultural diversity in community conservation, Martin questioned the attempts by conservationists to measure diversity in terms of “naturalness,” obscuring the intrinsic interrelationship between biological and cultural diversity and undermining the fluidity of social relations and cultural practices. The paper provocatively asked whether the quest to conserve biocultural diversity was actually destroying endogenous processes through which such diversity emerged. After bringing concrete examples of how new forms of governance intersected with biocultural diversity, Martin concluded

with a reflection on the unintended consequences of the implementation of biocultural diversity politics and how they often turned out to be predictable.

CHERYL LOUSLEY's position paper reflected on *Biodiversity*, a collection of papers edited by E.O. Wilson, which established biodiversity as a popular scientific concept. Lousley argued that E.O. Wilson's project could be read as part of a sentimental culture that provided a fantasy space for global subjectivity and legitimacy for global governance structures. While sentimental cultures were recognized as one of the features of major humanitarian movements, affect had not been incorporated in understandings of environmentalism. By considering popular cultural texts that employ sentiments, Lousley argued that we could better understand how biodiversity functioned at "the intersection of material, political, and affective economies."

JOSÉ AUGUSTO PÁDUA's paper told a success story of the application of the concept of biocultural diversity in reversing the effects of deforestation in Brazil. While the enduring tropical forests had been considered "useless" overgrown territories that had to be converted into "productive" landscapes, the acceptance and proliferation of the term of biocultural diversity in governmental, scientific, NGO, and other public and private circles led to the reimagining of Brazilian forests as repositories of value and national pride. Although Brazil is a country with vastly different cultures, economic development levels, and environments, Pádua argued that biocultural diversity resonated with national and regional political cultures and identity politics, even if implementation of the biocultural diversity framework might have led to some ambiguous developments in particular contexts.

The workshop concluded with a short discussion about plans to publish position papers, possible venues for presenting the projects that were started for this workshop, and ways to further continue the conversations.

-- Diana Mincyte and Ursula Münster