

Deakin Anthropology Seminars



Dr Erin Fitz-Henry

University of Melbourne

The 'Rights' of Nature in an Age of White Supremacy?

The past ten years have witnessed a flourishing of research across the social sciences that aims to better theorize the relationships between globally intensifying racism and the deepening ecological crisis. However, some of the most eco-centric parts of the environmental movement in the Global North have been slow to contribute to this conversation. In this paper, drawing on ethnographic work with grassroots lawyers and community activists for the 'rights of nature' in the United States, I consider how leading practitioners of the 'rights of nature' (RoN) movement both inadvertently rehearse racialized exclusions and, at the same time, increasingly come to understand their affinities with movements for racial justice. After briefly considering how racism has historically marked efforts to extend moral and legal 'personhood' to ecosystems in ways that continue to make solidarity work vexed and difficult, I show that, despite these exclusionary legacies, RoN activists are experimenting with municipal law-making in ways that both parallel and intersect with recent movements to end police violence. Instead of focusing narrowly on the problem of the denial of 'rights' to non-humans, RoN activists are increasingly concerned with the broader structural problem of state pre-emption over local decision-making and the profoundly anti-democratic nature of a state/corporate nexus which is limiting possibilities for progressive action across a wide range of justice issues. Whilst these legal experiments do not resolve enduring tensions between anti-racist, post-colonial, and environmental struggles, they suggest some important re-directions taking place among historically white environmental activists at a time when white supremacist organizations associated with the Alt-Right are actively appropriating and redeploying various strands of eco-centrism.

Erin Fitz-Henry is a Senior Lecturer in Anthropology and Development Studies at the University of Melbourne. She is currently working on a book about movements for the rights of nature in the US, Ecuador, and Australia.



Thursday 6 May, 4.00 – 6.00 pm via zoom

Join Zoom Meeting

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Meeting ID: 893 3063 6101

Password: 03268247

For further information contact

melinda.hinkson@deakin.edu.au or

gillian.tan@deakin.edu.au