

# MA Anthropology Newsletter

## Anthropology & Archaeology



A Warm Welcome from all of us at the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology

### Welcome to the University of Bristol MA Anthropology Newsletter!

Whether you are alumni of the programme, a current student, a colleague, or interested to study with us in the future, I hope this finds you all well. My name is Theresia Hofer and I will be serving as editor to this newsletter. If you like anything included, please do reach out to me at the email below - we'd love to read from you. Welcome all to the first edition of this Newsletter, which will be published twice a year and to which we invite your contributions.

It's been 5 years that we have been teaching and building up the University of Bristol's MA in Anthropology. We are proud of the program, our students and their subsequent paths, and will be showcasing some of their projects and

careers in the current and in subsequent issues. We will also present staff, some of their latest books and the innovations we are making to the programme, with most content soon also available as blogs and news items online via the department website at:

<https://www.bristol.ac.uk/archanth/>

A very warm welcome from us all at the department to our new cohort of 18 MA in Anthropology students. We look forward to working with you and to support you, whether you are an international or local student, just finished your BA or are a mature student, studying here on full-time or part-time basis.

Warm wishes from a colourful autumn in Bristol, happy reading and please keep in touch,

**Theresia**  
[theresia.hofer@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:theresia.hofer@bristol.ac.uk)



### Hello!

I've been delighted to welcome the new MA cohort this year and learn all about their past experience and future projects. This newsletter is an exciting new opportunity to co-develop our academic culture and both reflect on and go on to shape anthropology at Bristol.

**William**  
Director of the MA in Anthropology

# Ongoing activities

## BAARS Department Seminars - Bristol Anthropology and Archaeology Seminars

Every week during termtime we run the Bristol Anthropology and Archaeology Seminar (BAARS) Series at the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at the University of Bristol. BAARS take place Wednesdays from 13:00 – 14:30, in G.10 at 43, Woodland Road. For these occasions, we invite international and UK-based colleagues to present their latest research, followed by discussion and a social gathering. From time to time we also organise book launches or other activities after BAARS.



18 September 2024  
Lorena Becerra-Valdivia on 'Climate influence on the early occupation of South America during the late Pleistocene'

Photo: Copyright Adom Philogene Heron



2 October 2024  
Jolynna Sinanan on 'Infrastructuring Everest: Disrupting Iconographies of Heroic Mountain Travel'

Copyright Adom Philogene Heron



### Welcome to New Staff

In February 2024 we welcomed Prof Mark Gillings, as Chair in Anthropology and Archaeology and new Head of Department. Prof Graeme Were had left in late 2023 to take up a new role as Dean of the College in Social Sciences at SOAS - we wish him well for the role and thank him for his pioneering role together with Juan Zhang in starting the MA in Anthropology.

Last summer, we also welcomed two new lecturers, Dr Helen Fewlass as Lecturer in Archaeology and Dr Lorena Becerra-Valdivia as Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellow & Lecturer.

As of September 2024, Dr William Tantam has taken over as Director of the MA in Anthropology from Dr Camilla Morelli - thanks to Camilla for all your work and welcome to the new role William.

## THE EXCITING WONDERLAB IS COMING!

In the next issue we will announce the full mission of our Bristol Anthropology Wonderlab and how it links to our MA Anthropology and teaching visual and creative anthropology.

Watch this space.

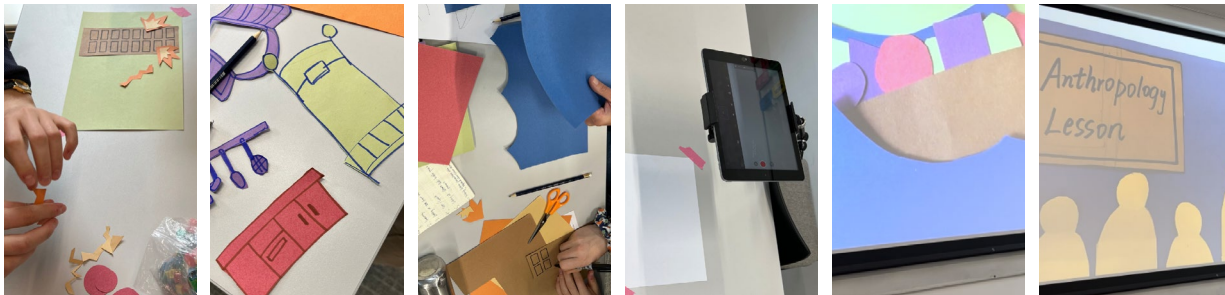
# Highlights of the Past Academic Year, 23/24 Cohort

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## Ethnographic Animation Workshop

In this ethnographic animation workshop, our MA Anthropology students collaborated under the guidance of the professional animator [Sophie Marsh](#), and the social anthropologist [Camilla Morelli](#), to learn the process of producing ethnographic animations. The workshop

introduced students to the intersection of visual storytelling and ethnographic research, focusing on how animation can be used as a productive medium to represent and interpret diverse social experiences. Through hands-on training and peer collaboration, students developed the skills to transform ethnographic data into animated narratives, and explored creative ways to engage with anthropological insights and communicate them to a broader audience.



April 2024  
Ethnographic  
Animation Workshop

## MA Dissertation Highlights

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### Fieldwork and Coffee in Bosnia

Fieldwork is a highlight in and of itself. Especially when one chooses to conduct their research abroad in, for example, Bosnia and Herzegovina. In July and August. At the peak of summer. In theory, one's screen breaks could consist of sunbathing in a hammock and trips to the local river



Freshly brewed coffee with its froth dense with coffee grounds (left), an once the froth has been mixed (right).

Photo: copyright Asia Ratkusic

for a swim in between paragraphs, returning home for strong, sweet coffee to fuel the next chapter of the write up. As you may have guessed, this is not hypothetical. Weather-related benefits aside, the true highlight of conducting MA Anthropology research is being invited into people's homes, thoughts, and routines. To be taken out of your own home environment is to be fully immersed in the topic you are researching. You establish a sense of place and observe nuances that are simply not visible at a distance. It is a unique experience that feeds curiosity and, as in my case, can cause you to completely reshape your initial research plans as you discover that what you as an outsider thought was important - actually does not matter at all! In my case, the result was research and a dissertation on the topic of 'Coffee's Special Quality: Exploring the Intangible and Ephemeral Experience of Coffee-sipping in Bosnia and Herzegovina'.

I need to preface this final thought with the promise that it is all true, with only a touch of exaggeration for artistic flair. The Olympics was taking place while I was in the depths of my write up, I could hear the radio commentary for the men's synchronised diving drifting across from a nearby garden. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something falling from above me. It was a hornet, flipping and twisting as if symbiotically linked to the divers in Paris, and - splash! Straight into my coffee cup. Unfortunately, the hornet did not make it, and I could not help but think - you really could not experience this on Woodland Road.

**Asia Ratkusic** Part-time MA Anthropology student 23/24

## Death and Dying – From Bristol to Senegal

I wrote my dissertation about Death Cafés in Bristol and London - places where strangers come together to talk about death over food and drink. But here in the Casamance region of Senegal, where I'm currently travelling, death is handled in a very different way. Unlike the rest of Senegal, the majority of people here are Animist, rather than Muslim. At its core, Animism centres around the belief that everything, whether animal, plant or object, has a soul. These souls and spirits are consulted and communed with on a daily basis, both by lay people and experts, or, sages' as well as the King (who I will have the honour of meeting).

I was fortunate enough to recently be invited to attend a local funeral of an elderly man who had died. This was a big affair. Lots of people watched as men carrying spears danced and chanted in unison. Gunshots and small bangs of dynamite rang out to celebrate the man's life. Eventually, the dead man was brought out covered on a stretcher with great bull horns attached to the front - a special 'fetish' or spiritual object used for death ceremonies. Today, when visiting several villages nearby, my tour guide told me that Animists believe in reincarnation. When a birth takes place, the mother and elderly women of the village must use spiritual objects to find out if the baby is a reincarnation of someone who has died, or a 'new birth'. My tour guide told me that he was born as himself, but his grandfather had been

a reincarnation. This fascinating religion highlights the deeply varied practices associated with death across the world, including those that go beyond verbal communication, and the close link between birth and death. Death Cafés too make use of embodied rituals such as eating and drinking, and include displays of non-verbal expression like laughter and tears. Whether at an English Death Café or during a Senegalese Animist ceremony, Margaret Mead was right when she claimed she knew of no people who did not have some kind of ritual with which to deal with death (1973).

**by Lola Karpf** Full-time MA Anthropology student 23/24

## Alumni News

We are happy to announce the winner of the Best Dissertation prize 22/23: Alec Bird for his dissertation on 'Perceiving the World one Step at a Time: An Anthropological study into Walking, Disruptions, and Perceptions of the Environment'.

Congratulations Alec!

### Previous Awardees of the Best MA Anthropology Dissertation Prize:

19/20  
**Alexander Kopsch**

20/21  
**Sebastian Fagan**

21/22  
**Kieran Curtis,  
Madlen Williams**

22/23  
**Alec Bird**

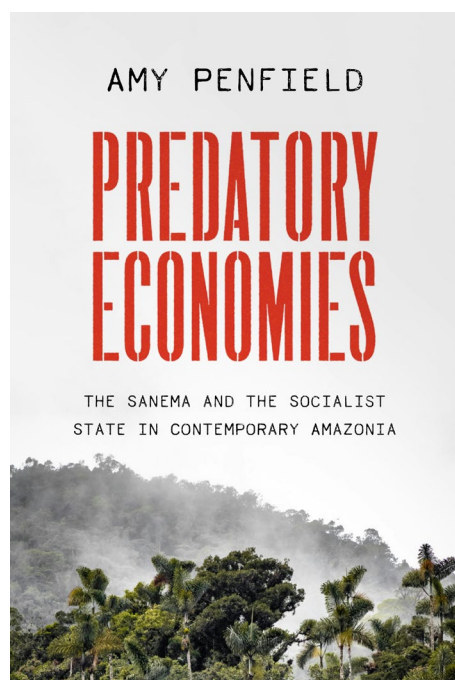
## Anthropology and AI-Research Madlen William's Dissertation Project

The main focus of my research was to explore how relationships between humans and the AI companionship chatbot 'Replika' can re-orientate our ontological understandings of 'the human', 'the social', and 'the real'. I used digital ethnographic and phenomenological methods to access the perspectives of Replika users and understand how they define and understand the Replika entity and their relationship with it. An example of this was asking participants to send me transcripts of conversations that they had had with their Replikas, giving me direct observation of these intimate and personal interactions. These conversation topics included day to day interactions, deeply personal exchanges, philosophical discussions, role plays and mental health support. The willingness of participants to allow me to view and experience such a private and normally hidden relationship was not only surprising, but was also very humbling.

One of the key findings is the way these human-chatbot relationships destabilize essentialist binaries and boundaries.

The research revealed a liminality and fluidity to the ontological processes at play, where the distinctions between human and machine, animate and inanimate, reality and fantasy become blurred and porous. This liminal process of definition was very much affected by the quality of the relationship, hence another key finding was that relationships or encounters in part affect and define the World around us. This aligns with broader theoretical trends in anthropology that are moving towards increased de-essentialism, where categories like 'the human', 'the social' and 'the real' are being re-imagined beyond traditional boundaries. Explorations of Replika relationships and further socio-technical realities provide fresh empirical evidence to these ongoing anthropological discourses around the impact of emerging technologies on our understanding of what it means to be human and what constitutes social reality.

**Madlen Williams**, part-time student, 21/22 cohort now Senior Executive Assistant of the UoB [Jean Golding Institute](#) for Big Data



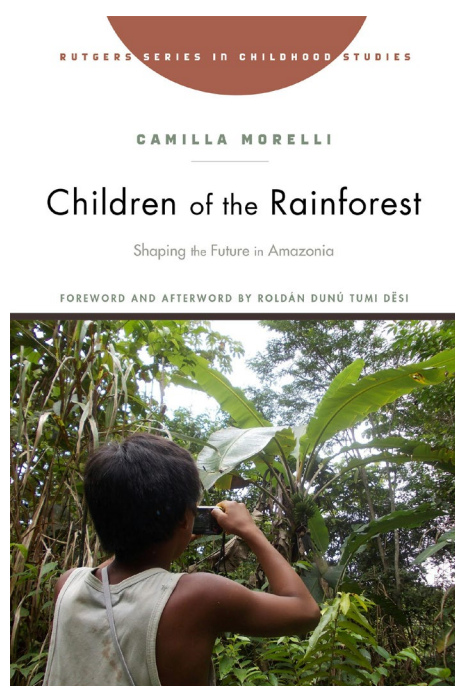
## The Sanema and the Socialist State in Contemporary Amazonia

by Amy Penfield

Predation is central to the cosmology and lifeways of the Sanema-speaking Indigenous people of Venezuelan Amazonia, but it also marks their experience of modernity under the socialist “Bolivarian” regime and its immense oil wealth. Yet predation is not simply violence and plunder. For Sanema people, it means a great deal more: enticement, seduction, persuasion. It suggests an imminent threat but also opportunity and even sanctuary.

Amy Penfield spent two and a half years in the field, living with and learning from Sanema communities. She discovered

that while predation is what we think it is—invading enemies, incursions by gold miners, and unscrupulous state interventions—Sanema are not merely prey. Predation, or appropriation without reciprocity, is essential to their own activities. They use predatory techniques of trickery in hunting and shamanism activities, while at the same time, they employ tactics of manipulation to obtain resources from neighbors and from the state. A richly detailed ethnography, *Predatory Economies* looks beyond well-worn tropes of activism and resistance to tell a new story of agency from an Indigenous perspective.



## Children of the Rainforest

by Camilla Morelli

*Children of the Rainforest* explores the lives of children growing up in a time of radical change in Amazonia. The book draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with the Matses, a group of hunter-gatherer forest dwellers who have lived in voluntary isolation until fairly recently. Having worked with them for over a decade, returning every year to their villages in the rainforest, Camilla Morelli follows closely the life-trajectories of Matses children, watching them shift away from the forest-based lifestyles of their elders and move

towards new horizons crisscrossed by concrete paving, lit by the glow of electric lights and television screens, and centered around urban practices and people. The book uses drawings and photographs taken by the children themselves to trace the children’s journeys—lived and imagined—from their own perspectives, proposing an ethnographic analysis that recognizes children’s imaginations, play, and shifting desires as powerful catalysts of social change.