

Electrifying Anthropology: 14-16 March 2016

Workshop report

Electrifying Anthropology aimed to generate a new international network bringing together leading anthropologists currently addressing questions of electricity. Together, the network will develop a new empirical and theoretical field and push the boundaries of anthropological theory. Co-organised by Dr Simone Abram of Durham University and Dr Brit Ross Winthereik of IT University Copenhagen, the workshop brought 27 international scholars to Durham University in North-East England, to debate approaches to electricity over 3 days of workshops. The event was supported by the Durham Energy Institute, whose then Director, Professor Simon Hogg, welcomed the delegates and addressed them on the importance of interdisciplinary research on energy.

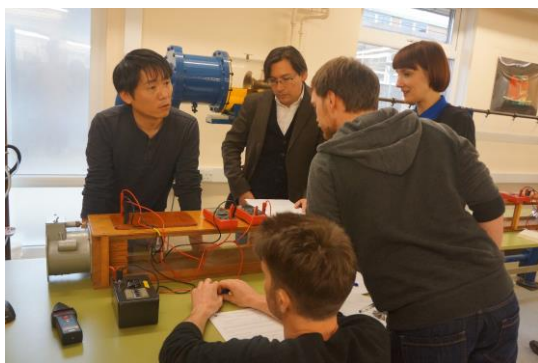
The workshop was framed around three key themes, and involved practical sessions (see attached programme). Three sessions of paper-presentations with discussion were held, with one on each day addressing the themes:

- grids, infrastructures and economies
- material cultures of electricity and questions of citizenship, place, identity
- currents in electrified anthropology

The first practical session involved a comparison of the aesthetics, semiotics and practices of consumer bills. This lively session raised numerous issues related to communication and imagination of electricity, the role of the corporation in the nation, and the concepts of citizenship and consumerism intrinsic to billing practices. The sessions enabled small groups to compare their own bills from different countries and different companies, revealing contrasting practices of electricity supply, state regulation, consumer powers, and staff roles in corporations.



A second practical ethnographic session brought the participants into an electrical lab, where participants were invited to shape small aluminium discs into turbine blades and test their efficiency in a wind tunnel. Each group had several aluminium discs to shape and test, and were obliged to get to grips with electrical meters, and learn to behave as trainee engineers in a noisy lab. Experiencing the unreliabilities of equipment, the need to make 'engineering assumptions', follow concise instructions with extensive tacit assumptions, and deal with metal and motors was a key ethnographic experience, and raised many issues for discussion in relation to the



engineering mode of apprehending and engaging with electricity, cross-disciplinary collaboration and anthropological knowledge practices in and beyond laboratories.

As a supplement to the workshop, the Durham Energy Institute invited us to host a public debate in the evening of day 2 on the theme of 'The Charge Against Electricity', based on the paper of the same title published by Professor Tim Ingold and Mike Anusas in *Cultural Anthropology* (<http://culanth.org/articles/789-the-charge-against-electricity>). Professor Dominic Boyer and Mike Anusas were the first



speakers for and against the motion, seconded by Barbara Vest, Director of Generation at UK Energy (the national trade body for energy companies) and Dr Mary Black of Northern Power Grid (the regional Distribution Network Organisation). The debate was well attended and live-streamed and will shortly be available to be viewed on the DEI website.

The following outcomes were generated by the workshop:

1. A Jisclist has been set up at ELECTRICANTHRO@JISCMail.AC.UK This will serve to expand the network and offer regular communication. At present, it includes a weekly summary of energy news, compiled by Edwin Schott of Oslo University.
2. A collected edition has been prepared based on workshop themes, which is currently under review. We hope to see it published in 2018. Editors are Simone Abram, Brit Ross Winthereik and Tom Yarrow.
3. Dr. Jamie Cross proposed a publication of electricity in 50 objects. The proposal was taken up by Jamie, Simone, Mike Anusas and Lea Schick, and has now been published as 'Our Lives with Electric Things', by *Current Anthropology*, in their series 'Theorizing the contemporary'. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/1277-our-lives-with-electric-things>

In financial terms, the workshop was very modest and we believe we have achieved outstanding results from a minimal financial investment. Most of the participants agreed to support the foundation of what is now the EASA Energy Anthropology Network, which was formalised after the 2016 EASA conference in Milan. We look forward to our next EASA conference in Stockholm in 2018.

We should like to thank Wenner Gren for supporting the workshop and enabling us to take forward this exciting project.

Simone Abram and Brit Ross Winthereik. January 2018