

# ETNOFOOR

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## Introduction

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# Introduction

## *Thick Connections* – Reimagining Roots in Anthropology

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Humans think they know with certainty where their being ends and someone else's starts. With their roots tangled and caught up underground, linked to fungi and bacteria, trees harbour no such illusions. For us [trees], everything is interconnected.

Elif Shafak, *The Island of Missing Trees*

The idea of roots expresses how we are tangled up with others in lasting and enduring ways. It raises questions about our connections with other people, lifeforms, and landscapes, and the ways they thicken or change over time, branching off in unforeseen directions and sprouting up in unexpected places. These are particularly timely questions for *Etnofoor*. This is the year that we celebrate that 35 years ago, a group of passionate anthropology students at the University of Amsterdam

rekindled a then somewhat dormant departmental newsletter and transformed it into the anthropological journal you are currently reading. In her guest editorial, Irene Stengs – one of the co-founders of *Etnofoor* – reflects warmly on the affective ties of friendship and solidarity that the journal has forged over time. She fittingly uses the mycelium metaphor to describe how such ties connect people, places, and events.

While these are connections to be cherished, anniversaries also provoke reflection on how lineages function as sites of omission and exclusion. The history of anthropology clearly shows how genealogies are often produced by tracing certain lines (of scholarship) at the expense of others. Indeed, efforts to decolonise the discipline are in no small part about pointing out important erasures and appropriations in long-established lineages of thought, while also drawing atten-

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tion to ‘the significance of unheralded contributions’ (Allen and Jobson 2016: 130). Acknowledging one’s roots is thus very much about deciding which connections and ancestries to recognise and celebrate, making the *Etnofoor* lustrum an appropriate moment to interrogate and revisit this notion.

Roots, in anthropological thought and popular discourse, straddle the line between metaphorical and material realities. The notion of roots evokes images of deep (temporal) connections to particular environments and is often employed to capture place-specific and affective dynamics of belonging and identification. Indeed, roots are frequently naturalised as organic or even biological attachments to a geographic site of origin (Hayes 2016: 1). Intertwined as they are with soils and territories, roots may also contain nationalist, nativist, or racist connotations, such as those that we find in narratives of autochthony and ‘*blut und boden*’. Malkki (1992: 31) argues that such arborescent conceptions of nation and culture are shaped by lingering assumptions of sedentarism. The expectation that people ultimately lead sedentary lives, firmly rooted in distinct territories, has ‘deeply metaphysical and deeply moral’ implications, as it allows for the sinking of “peoples” and “cultures” into “national soils”, and the “family of nations” into Mother Earth’ (Malkki 1992: 31).

The equation of rootedness with static primordial attachments to place has turned *uprootedness* into a condition that is closely associated with the suspension of belonging. Such a sedentarist approach to rootedness considers mobility ‘as suspicious, as threatening, as a problem’ (Cresswell 2006: 55) and has paved the way for the criminalisation of nomadic, mobile, or

displaced communities. At the same time, as Alpa Shah (2012) has pointed out, an exaggeration of stability and place-attachment can also serve as a source of harmful stereotypes and simplifications. She is referring specifically to the ways in which Indigenous communities are sometimes locked ‘in the rootedness to their land and harmony with nature’ in what she describes as a form of ‘eco-incarceration’ (Shah 2012: 32).

To counteract such forms of sedentarism, ‘roots’ have long been paired with ‘routes’ in anthropological thought (Clifford 1994). Blunt (2005: 10) elaborates that:

...the term ‘roots’ might imply an original homeland from which people have scattered, and to which they might seek return, the term ‘routes’ complicates such ideas by focusing on more mobile and transcultural geographies of home. Rather than view place, home, culture and identity as located and bounded ... an emphasis on ‘routes’ suggests their more mobile, and often deterritorialized, intersections over space and time.

This line of thinking is particularly well-established in the field of diaspora studies, which has not only embraced the notion of routes but also explores the many ways in which experiences of staying and moving are intertwined with one another (Fagerlid and Tisdell 2020: 2).

Such efforts to decouple rootedness from the static immobility that is often associated with roots (Hayes 2016: 12) have helped to push the theorisation of homes, identity, and genealogies in more nuanced directions. Ahmed (2008: 88), for instance, writes that there is

always ‘movement and dislocation within the very forming of homes as complex and contingent spaces of inhabitation’. Hayes (2016), moreover, advocates for a queering of roots and argues that we need to understand genealogy, not as a patrilineal family tree, but as a mangrove that can ‘offer roots without asserting any single one as an absolute origin’. In doing so, he draws inspiration from the literature on Black and Caribbean diasporas, including the work of Édouard Glissant (1990) and Paul Gilroy (1993), who have long disentangled the search for roots and identity from sedentarist and essentialist understandings of origins and racialisation. The work of Francio Guadeloupe, whose most recent book *Black Man in the Netherlands: An Afro-Antillean Anthropology* is reviewed in this issue by Niek van de Pas, also stands in this tradition.

The contributions to this issue all, in their own way, show that roots and routes are intimately entangled. While some of them focus on how experiences of kinship, genealogy, and community are constituted through movement and journeys, others hone in on the dynamic ‘biographical connections’ between people and landscapes (Tsing 2005: 190). Indeed, the fact that landscapes themselves are never simply inhabited but always constituted through movement (Ingold 2011) further complicates the equation of rootedness with a static attachment to place. Dwelling *within* the landscape is always a condition of being tangled up in an ‘entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence’ (Ingold 2011: 68). These beings include actual plants and trees, with roots whose growth and development deeply challenge allusions of fixity

– intertwined as they are with wider circulations of water, air, light, and soil. Or, as Sophie Chao (2022: 204) suggests: ‘Trees, and plants in general, are living embodiments of the principle of relational becoming ... [b]eing one by becoming with many, they have no definable center or point of origin’. Likewise, roots should be understood as inherently relational.

We propose to reimagine roots, not as rigid and unyielding ties to a particular place or territory, but as *thick connections* to certain histories, ancestries, socialities, and living or material landscapes. Roots are like an interlacing network of trails and connections that deepen or wear down over time as others trace the same or intersecting routes. Whether these connections are well-established or need to be actively searched for, what makes them *thick* is the experience of going where others have gone before or, presumably, will go after. The notion of roots suggests the possibility of perpetuating and extending relations beyond human lifespans, raising a myriad of questions about, for example, the durable connections that become manifest through kinship, genealogy, or landscapes. In six research articles, the contributing authors to this issue have engaged with such questions and address the concept of roots across transnational, national, or site-specific contexts.

We open this issue with a contribution by Peter Pels that explores the linkages between genealogy and race. He does so by revisiting the famous novel by Alex Haley titled *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. Relying on oral history, Haley tells the story of his forefather Kunta Kinte, who was enslaved and forcibly displaced from West Africa to North America. The book, in which Haley ultimately traces down his own ancestry

back to a village in Gambia, had an enormous impact and inspired many African Americans to embark on their own roots journeys. In analysing this search for origins and ancestors, Pels pays particular attention to the figure of 'X'. For Malcolm X, this letter famously denoted the refusal to take over the name of his enslaving forefathers. The figure of X, moreover, also speaks to the violent erasures and omissions in genealogies as a result of slavery. Pels juxtaposes Haley's efforts to undo some of these erasures by tracing back his own ancestry to a single forefather with the work of W.E.B. Du Bois. Rather than using genealogy as a method for asserting identity and re-establishing a lineage that was violently erased, Du Bois tries to *undo* identity by showing how his own family tree is a product of intermixtures that were obscured to create a space of imagined racial purity. While using genealogy in starkly different ways, both authors confront the negation of kinship through slavery and the silences this has created. Pels concludes that Haley's search for singular roots, although obviously an exercise in selective affiliation, has created an important space for mourning and the recognition of past suffering, which may ultimately have a hopeful potential.

The contribution by Gerwin van Schie also offers a critical examination of what is either asserted or erased in the representation of lineages. He does this by looking at a series of DNA portraits of the Dutch Royal family designed by artist Jacob van der Beugel. These artworks are displayed in the so-called *Groene Salon* of 'Huis ten Bosch', which is home to the Dutch King Willem-Alexander and Queen Máxima. The artworks consist of a series of abstract white and red sequences that contain human DNA, in part retrieved

from the Queen and King themselves. The distinct colour pattern results from the use of white and red bricks, which are partly made from Rhine River clay. Using a postcolonial lens, Van Schie argues that these DNA portraits forge unintended yet uncomfortable linkages between ancestry, blood, and soil, and are haunted by colonial history and lingering ideas about '*blut und boden*'. This becomes clear from the fact that the artworks are literally made with Dutch soil and (royal) DNA. Moreover, in the sampling of the latter, a conscious decision was made to use the gene that represents the ability to digest lactose, and that is therefore closely associated with Europeanness and Whiteness. Van Schie demonstrates that this problematic representation of Dutchness is made possible by processes of datafication and concludes that these technologies help to institute a form of *colonial aphasia* by rendering particular parts of the cultural archive visible while actively obscuring and silencing others.

The next contribution by Solène Prince and Katherine Burlingame explicitly situates issues of ancestry and genealogy as part of living landscapes. Focusing on roots journeys, the authors examine how the availability of DNA tests and online genealogical research tools allows us citizens of Swedish descent to establish new connections and lifeworlds. They show that roots journeys are not just a way to trace down living relatives, but also a means of connecting with the Swedish landscape and material heritage sites. Prince and Burlingame coin the term 'ancestral lifeworlds' to make sense of this phenomenological search for continuity and connectedness. They argue that the ancestral landscape not merely constitutes a physical space, but also represents an 'intangible space of memory' that allows

people to forge meaningful connections between past, present, and future. Rather than evoking a static sense of roots, Prince and Burlingame show that genealogical journeys are embedded in an experiential tapestry that interweaves multiple layers of meaning and activity.

In the photo essay 'Rooting the Coptic Diaspora: Mediating Familiarity and Adapting Churches in the Netherlands', Matija Miličić discusses how members of the Dutch Coptic community are rooted in Coptic diasporic realms through the (re)production of visual and material media. This essay argues that Dutch Copts establish ties with a 'Coptic space' and their 'new land' through religious traditions from Egypt as well as reiterations and re-inventions of those traditions aimed at second- and third-generation Copts. Through the use of visual materials, Miličić draws our attention to the ways in which members of the Coptic Church in the Netherlands attempt to create a sense of home by re-making church buildings, displaying religious icons, setting up minimarkets, and other practices of 'world making'. The author argues that these efforts of 'rooting' successive generations of a diasporic community through material, spiritual, and sensory practices in effect transform Coptic heritage.

Subsequently, Maïke Melles discusses notions of rootedness and landscape in the context of the Spanish *dehesa* – an open woodland consisting mainly of holm and cork oaks that provides a home for Iberian pigs. Melles aptly demonstrates how human-porcine relationships transform within the *dehesa* and how such changes provide a starting point to understand how the rootedness of pigs and their constitutive relationships with farms within the physical landscape raises questions about representations of, for instance, cultural

heritage. The article effectively argues for taking into consideration the complexity and multiplicity of landscape by considering it as fundamentally affective. In this way, Melles shows how social and relational registers within the *dehesa* landscape are entangled with the mobility of memories and meanings produced by human-porcine interrelations.

Finally, much like Prince and Burlingame, Jarrod Sim interrogates and interweaves notions of ancestry and landscape in a captivating account that discusses how the Paridrayan community in Southern Taiwan, which was displaced from their ancestral lands after a devastating typhoon, navigates and negotiates perceptions of rootedness and belonging through (mourning) rituals. The article analyses how the notion of *vecik* – described as 'an indigenous term referring to the spatiotemporal interconnectedness of the community within their ancestral land' – plays a role in the ways that landscapes acquire meaning. Sim suggests that the situatedness of *vecik* offers an opening to understand the intrinsic relationship between rituals and localised conceptions of rootedness and land. Using *vecik* as a conceptual and contextual basis, the author delves into how material and symbolic links are established between ancestral lands and the Paridrayan community and provides a compelling story about the role of rituals and the ways that they function temporally. Sim shows that both living and ancestral landscapes are intertwined with feelings and lived experiences of displacement as well as with the relationality between land, ancestors, and afterlives.

This relationality brings us back to this issue's overarching theme of roots as *thick connections*. What unites the different contributions to this issue, is that

they all show that connections to ancestors, genealogies, or living landscapes have a clear temporal dimension. Indeed, many of the articles highlight how people invest in or are haunted by the *durability* of relationships that transcend individual lives and human lifespans. Reimagining roots, we propose, is thus ultimately about finding ways to interrogate the durability or longevity of attachments without falling back on sedentarist tropes and, hence, about understanding how such attachments can, indeed, be understood as mycelia of thick connections.

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