

**critical agency**

research group  
free university berlin

# ethnographilosophy

## conference

**speakers:**

**lisa guenther  
quill kukla  
shelbi meissner  
bernardo zacka  
and many more**

# 15/16 June 2026

**09.45am - 6pm  
Free University Berlin  
Otto-von-Simson-Str. 26  
L115/L116 Seminarzentrum**

**Organised by Quill Kukla, Antoine Louette,  
Emilia Mertens and Deborah Mühlebach**

Space is limited, for participation please send  
and email to [emilia.mertens@fu-berlin.de](mailto:emilia.mertens@fu-berlin.de)

Registration deadline: June 1st 2026



**FREIE  
UNIVERSITÄT  
BERLIN**

# ethnophilosophy

conference

## Programme

June 15, 2026

- 09:45am**      **Welcome**
- 10:00am**      **Bernardo Zacka**  
Before a Word Is Spoken: The Institutional Atmosphere of the Welfare State
- 11:10am**      **Coffee Break**
- 11:30am**      **Place/Location Matters**  
Emma Nagler: Hermeneutical Displacement as Epistemic Violence  
Katherina Gontaryuk: The Cops Next Door  
Sonja Riegler: Orchestrated Forgetting and White Ignorance
- 1:15pm**        **Lunch Break**
- 2:30pm**        **Methodology and Research Design**  
María Bacilio: Field Philosophy as Parasitic Philosophy  
Henrike Kohpeiß: Kiruna. How to Research Affects of Transformation?  
Aleksandra Knežević: Using Autoethnography to Study Science in Practice
- 4:15pm**        **Coffee Break**
- 4:40pm**        **Quill Kukla**  
Philosophy as Ethnography and Ethnography as Philosophy
- 5:50pm**        **End**

**Dinner at Südblock**

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## Programme

### June 16, 2026

- 09:45am**      **Coffee**
- 10:00am**      **Shelbi Nahwilet Meissner**  
Deathnographies: Indigenous Feminist Epistemology  
and the Problem of Death as Knowledge
- 11:10am**      **Coffee Break**
- 11:30am**      **Adressing Systematic Injustice**  
Casey Grippo: Solidarity as Complex Political Intimacy  
Julien Spurling: Harm Reduction Philosophy & Ethnography in D.C.  
Sara Barbo: A Critical and Qualitative Phenomenology of  
Compromise in the Movement Toward Animal Liberation
- 1:15pm**      **Lunch Break**
- 2:45pm**      **Participant Community Ethnography**  
Emma Hardy: Accidental Ethnography at the Farmer's Market  
Marie Lippert: Narrating Exhaustion – Exhausted Narration  
Xiaoyi Tang: In, Not Merely about, the World: Ethnography, Senior  
Theatre, and Philosophical Critique in a Time of Humanities Crisis
- 4:30pm**      **Coffee Break**
- 4:50pm**      **Lisa Guenther**  
Following Anabaptists: An Ethnography of the Unobservable
- 6:00pm**      **End**

# Ethnographilosophy Conference – Titles and Abstracts

## 1. Bernardo Zacka

### **Before a word is spoken: The institutional atmosphere of the welfare state**

For most of those who interact with it, the state is a place—somewhere we go to do something or to have something done to us. What difference does it make if that space is bright or grim, bland or distinctive, hospitable or forbidding? This talk presents a book that reconstructs the architectural history of public employment offices (Jobcenters) in the UK, the US, and Denmark from the early twentieth century to the present. The book takes as its object something political theory does not ordinarily look at—the carpets, furniture, lighting, and layouts of administrative offices—and shows that architecture is a political force in its own right. At its best, architecture can give the fraught relationship between citizens and the welfare state a second chance, making it possible for parties often cast as adversaries to meet on a different footing. At its worst, it can corrode that relationship further, impeding the institution's ability to deliver on its democratically-sanctioned mandate. Methodologically, the talk models a form of political theory that proceeds through thick description and comparison, so that our sense of what we should demand of an interface between state and society emerges from sustained attention to how such interfaces actually function and are experienced.

## 2. Emma Nagler

### **Hermeneutical Displacement as Epistemic Violence: Black Memory at the Edge of Lincolnton**

Contemporary theories of epistemic injustice focus on harms arising within communicative contexts: testimonial exchanges, interpretive practices, and discursive interactions. These models illuminate credibility deficits, hermeneutical marginalization, and forms of silencing. What they do not capture is epistemic damage that emerges from the web of relations linking public memory, place, and the stories we tell about the past. History does not live only in the archives; it seeps into the ground beneath our feet and gets embedded in the built environment.

I introduce the term hermeneutical displacement to describe epistemic harms that follow from material displacement: the loss of conceptual and communicative resources that a place affords. This form of epistemic violence is made visible by Lincolnton, the historically Black neighborhood of St. Augustine, Florida. Founded in 1866 by formerly enslaved people, Lincolnton became a thriving Black community and, in 1963–64, the site of one of the most consequential civil rights campaigns in the United States. Local Black activists helped bring Martin Luther King Jr., Andrew Young, and other national civil rights figures to St. Augustine, where demonstrations, arrests, beatings, and white supremacist terror helped build pressure for the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The civil rights struggle in St. Augustine produced both national victory and local loss. In the years that followed, Black residents were intimidated, displaced, and made less secure in the city they had helped transform. Black activists left St. Augustine. Florida Memorial University, a historically Black institution, relocated from St. Augustine to

Miami. Lincolnville endured demographic and institutional changes that weakened its status as a living Black place-world.

Drawing on fieldwork in St. Augustine, including site documentation at museums, historical markers, and tour routes, I argue that the city's public memory involves a subtle form of epistemic violence. Black memory is preserved as historical content, but Black people are alienated from the everyday place-based conditions that would allow the community to function as a living claimant on the city's identity. The harm lies not simply in what is forgotten, but in how displacement changes the social geography of public history: who is present to tell the story, who is absent from the streets where the story is told, and whose absence is allowed to appear as ordinary.

### 3. Katherina Gontaryuk

#### **The Cops Nextdoor: How Surveillance Deputization Fuels Policing and Gentrification**

The proliferation of hyperlocal surveillance platforms like Nextdoor demands closer attention to the role individuals play in driving both policing and gentrification. On these platforms, residents mobilize their attention, labor, and devices to monitor public space, identify "suspicious" individuals profiled by perceived race and class, and rally neighbors and police to intervene, all without oversight or accountability. This paper examines the moral harms this practice generates. Through a discursive analysis of Nextdoor posts, I show how these platforms exacerbate a collective action problem: individual users, responding to localized fears and algorithmic incentives, jointly produce intensified policing and erode social trust, compounding historical injustices like mass incarceration. Police departments actively cultivate these dynamics by maintaining official accounts and encouraging residents to report suspicious behaviors. This creates a feedback loop in which deputized citizens supply crowd-sourced justifications for police intervention while police legitimation emboldens further surveillance. These dynamics reveal the scope of harms related to neighbor-driven surveillance on platforms like Nextdoor. Such platforms concentrate disproportionate influence over policing in the hands of white and upper-class residents, enabling them to become drivers of displacement and gentrification at the direct expense of those they surveil. Furthermore, we cannot assess such harms through individual posts; instead, racist or otherwise problematic posts create patterns that reinforce and perpetuate structural injustices. Finally, neighbor-driven surveillance constitutes a form of relational domination that erodes residents' equal standing in shared space and displaces policing authority beyond democratic constraints into the supposedly benign sphere of neighborly concern.

### 4. Sonja Riegler

#### **Orchestrated Forgetting and White Ignorance: A Case Study on Austria's "Guest Work" Labor Migration System**

Laying bare race- and migration-related forms of ignorance has long been central to advancing ignorance studies within critical epistemology. And yet, these debates remain geographically parochial and often focus primarily on the U.S. This talk extends Charles Mills's concept of "white ignorance" by examining its operation in Austria's postwar labor migration system. Focusing on the so-called "guest work" system of the 1960s-70s, it shows how migrant labor, which was central to Austria's economic growth, has been

marginalized in public memory and reframed as the origin of an “integration crisis,” obscuring both state recruitment interests and ongoing labor-migration practices. These distortions exemplify structured, motivated, and collective-level ignorance. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with former guest workers, historians, social scientists and museum practitioners, I link empirical research with a philosophical analysis of ignorance. The talk has three aims: (1) to situate white ignorance in a Central European context, (2) to clarify the mechanisms and social functions through which it is produced and sustained, and (3) to conceptualize so-called “mnemonic injustice” as a structural form of epistemic injustice shaped by selective and stereotyped remembering and forgetting. I also propose a methodological expansion within the field of critical epistemology, showing how qualitative interview material can deepen theoretical accounts of ignorance as a substantive epistemic and political practice.

## 5. María Bacilio

### **Field Philosophy as Parasitic Philosophy: A Mexican Case Study**

Field philosophy has gained significant traction and influence among France’s leading academic and publishing institutions over the last ten years. The specificity of field philosophy lies in the fact that its point of departure for thought and concept creation is prior fieldwork. Conducting such fieldwork has led philosophers to draw on qualitative research methods from the social sciences—including ethnography, participant observation, and archival research—which has inevitably generated criticism both from dogmatic philosophy and from the social sciences themselves. In response to these critiques, and in order to highlight the contributions of field philosophy to situated knowledge and the politics of writing, my lecture will proceed in two parts.

First, I will show why this new philosophical current should be understood as “parasitic.” This adjective refers to Jacques Derrida’s critical reading and conceptual proposal in relation to Immanuel Kant’s *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*. Second, drawing on examples from my fieldwork in Mexico—related to enforced disappearance and motherhood—I will show how critical ethnography enabled me to bring the concept of *anarchic justice* to life, and how my writing process itself did not emerge unscathed from this parasitic form of philosophy.

## 6. Henrike Kohpeiß

### **Kiruna. How to Research Affects of Transformation?**

The town of Kiruna in the Swedish Arctic is undergoing profound change. More than a century of mining beneath the town has destabilized the ground to such an extent that large parts of the city center are at risk of collapsing into the mine. As a result, around one-third of Kiruna is currently being relocated. Kiruna thus offers a unique opportunity to study the affective repertoires that accompany ecological and material upheaval. Feelings of grief over the loss of familiar sites, alongside trust and even excitement about the creation of a new city, reveal an ambivalent emotional relationship to change.

I aim to explore these affective dimensions of rapid ecological and infrastructural transformation in the Swedish Arctic through an ethnographic study to be conducted in 2027. Being on site and conducting interviews will enable me to trace how grief, loss, and hope are experienced, articulated, and mediated. The project aims for a deeper

understanding of how dramatic ecological transformations shape not only the lives of affected populations but also the ways landscapes are imagined, narrated, and felt.

## 7. Aleksandra Knežević

### **Using Autoethnography to Study Science in Practice**

Following the collapse of the Novi Sad train station canopy on November 1, 2024, Serbia experienced one of its largest student mobilizations in recent history, culminating in the occupation of five universities. During this period, I joined a research initiative to study the student movement as a philosopher of science with newly acquired training in empirical methods through doctoral research in the anthropology of science. Conducting fieldwork with an interdisciplinary team at the occupied Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad and the Faculty of Political Science in Belgrade, I became increasingly interested not only in the student movement itself, but also in what the research process revealed about scientific practice: the role of values in interpretation, epistemic tensions between disciplines, and the ethical constraints shaping research decisions in politically sensitive contexts.

In this talk, I use autoethnography to reflect on conducting socially and politically engaged interdisciplinary research. I argue that autoethnography offers philosophers of science access to dimensions of scientific practice that are difficult to capture through conventional methodological accounts, showing how reflexive lived experience can function as an epistemic resource for understanding science in practice.

## 8. Quill Kukla

### **Philosophy as Ethnography and Ethnography as Philosophy**

Calls for "empirically informed philosophy" have become common, but philosophers have no shared or systematic understanding of what sort of empirical work should inform philosophy, nor how it should do so. Projects that involve making our philosophical theories responsive to results in the natural sciences have little in common with "x-phi" projects involving social science experiments designed to elicit and statistically summarize people's philosophy-relevant intuitions; meanwhile, neither of these (I claim) bears much relationship to the rich role that ethnography can play in philosophy. I argue that for a specific range of philosophical questions, ethnography -- systematic observation in situ of uncontrolled, socially meaningful phenomena -- should serve as the primary source of content for philosophical analysis. Conversely, good ethnography should be understood as epistemologically closer to philosophy and other interpretive humanities than to the experimental sciences. I give a few examples of projects in which ethnography and philosophy work hand in hand in this way. I try to show that such ethnographic/philosophical methods are quite epistemologically distinct from the methods of other sorts of empirically informed philosophical projects, and that they have distinctive epistemic and normative value.

## 9. Shelbi Nahwilet Meissner

### **Deathnographies: Indigenous Feminist Epistemology and the Problem of Death as Knowledge**

This paper develops deathnography as an Indigenous feminist epistemological method. Deathnography proceeds from the premise that the dying and the dead are knowers, and that land and collective spaces retain epistemic force after loss. Drawing on practices in death care, community mourning, and land-based relations, I show that knowledge produced in proximity to death takes a distinct form from dominant epistemic models organized around productivity, individual cognition, and present-tense agency.

Rather than positioning ethnography as supplementary to philosophical inquiry, this account approaches ethnographic practice as a site of epistemic production shaped by relation, obligation, and limit. Under these conditions, the dying generate knowledge about constraint, livability, and responsibility, while the dead continue to shape knowledge through memory, land, and the demands they place on the living. Deathnography thus calls for an account of epistemic authority that extends beyond biological life and attends to qualitative differences among deaths, including those that sustain relational worlds and those that foreclose them.

Finally, I consider how death narratives circulate across social theory and digital media, shaping which deaths are recognized, repeated, or allowed to rest. Deathnography involves both attending to death and shaping how death is known and carried forward, including practices of restraint such as limiting circulation and honoring the right to be forgotten. While the method is grounded in Indigenous feminist epistemology, the account engages ongoing conversations in feminist philosophy, Indigenous epistemologies, and death studies.

## 10. Casey Grippo

### **Solidarity as Complex Political Intimacy: An Ethnographically Informed Account**

One night at the campus pub, fellow union organizers and I asked a dozen others why they kept putting in grueling, often thankless work. Their answer? Despite the struggle, they felt good about themselves—they wanted the version of themselves that solidarity produced. To make sense of solidarity's distinctive value, this paper argues for a novel understanding of solidarity as complex political intimacy.

Building on Talia Mae Bettcher's theory of interpersonal spatiality, I propose that solidarity functions through intimate recoding practices in which participants jointly construct their interpersonal boundaries, co-constituting their personal stakes and roles in "the struggle." Through internal conflicts over tactics and the collective risk of direct action, participants in solidarity find resilience against oppressive disempowerment by transforming their individual vulnerabilities into collective viability, thereby generating an empowered collective agent. However, the value of standing in solidarity remains even when the solidarity fails to achieve its concrete goals. The relationship of solidarity itself enables the ongoing constitution of aspirational selves.

Drawing on autoethnographic work from my own union, alongside ethnographic accounts of direct action groups (David Graeber; Shon Meckfessel), I show how solidarity's intimate recoding operates across multiple boundary systems, elucidating the key, normative difference-maker between liberatory solidarity and fanatical cohesion. Understanding

solidarity as political intimacy not only unifies existing theories of solidarity but also clarifies why—as my fellow organizers sensed—we keep putting in the work: for the selves we become together.

## 11. Julien Spurling

### **Harm Reduction Philosophy & Ethnography in Washington, D.C.**

North America faces an ongoing overdose crisis. Approaches to addressing the crisis tend to be fixed by politicians, law enforcement, and healthcare providers. The testimony, opinion and experiences of drug users are rarely incorporated. Some policymakers and healthcare providers are beginning to reckon with how to reimagine habitual drug use, and how to incorporate the non-credentialed expertise of users into their institutions. Likewise, user-activists are reckoning with how they might work within increasingly medicalized frameworks for “addiction” or “Substance Use Disorder” to secure the safety and wellbeing of community members. My research explores the obstacles and possibilities for collaborative policy development in this area, with attention to users’ narratives, practices and material culture of the harm reduction movement. I’ve worked in non-profit and government-run harm reduction organizations for several years, and have turned in recent months toward conducting more formal ethnographic research on the harm reduction movement.

Knowledge about safer illicit drug use is taboo knowledge. It is difficult to share or teach, let alone institutionalize against a background of social stigma and criminalization in the U.S.. Researchers and drug user advocates have repeatedly noted that this epistemic situation is deadly, and disproportionately results in the injury, overdose, death and incarceration of people of color, indigenous people, LGBTQ2S people, sex workers, and people who are financially and housing insecure.

Ethnographic field work can be an important, though sometimes fraught, avenue for understanding, documenting and sharing creative methods drug users find for warning the community about dangers in the drug supply, police presence, affirming the value and lives of drug users, and teaching one another how they might stay safe. Historically, ethnographers have been used as “officially unofficial” conduits for sharing harm reduction information by organizations like NIDA in an attempt to bypass federal prohibitions on harm reduction programs. This has allowed for somewhat covert dissemination of potentially life-saving information, but it has also arguably fostered a new type of moralizing and responsabilization around drug use.

My hope and belief is that ethnographic research can provide a foundation for socially engaged philosophy that departs from the traditional academic model by starting with the interests of community collaborators and aims toward producing knowledge and tools for use by that community. I hope to share some of the ways I am attempting to integrate ethnographic work in my research methodology.

## 12. Sara Barbo

### **A Critical and Qualitative Phenomenology of Compromise in the Movement Toward Animal Liberation**

Like many other political movements, animal advocacy is punctured by a conflict between the *reformist approach*, which promotes animal welfare by balancing animal needs with existing frameworks, and an *abolitionist approach*, which views incremental reforms as inconsistent with animal liberation, advocating instead for the complete abolition of animal ab/use. The paper contributes to this debate by shifting attention from abstract moral and political philosophy to a more engaged perspective grounded in the lived experiences of animal advocates. By drawing on critical phenomenology and qualitative interviews with activists in Estonia and Finland, the paper explores the experience of *compromise*, a term that is mobilized frequently in this debate, but has remained relatively undertheorized. In particular, the paper attends to the temporal and affective structure of compromise, arguing that compromise-making can be experienced as an ethically and politically fraught movement toward a more desirable future, generating hope, empathy, and agency, but also loss, complicity, and estrangement from oneself and one's political community. I conclude by thinking how compromise can also be understood as a way in which activists affectively make do in a temporality not of their own.

## 13. Emma Hardy

### **Accidental Ethnography at the Farmer's Market**

This talk reflects on what I am calling *accidental ethnography*: philosophical work that grows out of long-term participation in communities, even when that participation was not initially understood or structured as ethnographic research. My own dissertation work on local food and agriculture in Southeast Michigan has been shaped by years of involvement with farmers, farmers markets, food assistance programs, and local food institutions. Over time, I have come to see that many of my philosophical questions about food, value, regulation, localness, and community are rooted in relationships and experiences that are not easily separable from my role as a participant in these spaces.

The talk focuses on the ethical and methodological uneasiness this creates. What do philosophers owe to the people whose conversations, conflicts, practices, and stories shape our thinking, especially when there were no consent forms, no IRB process, and no clear moment at which "research" began? I think through these questions by considering several cases from my own work, including alternative agriculture, food assistance interviews, and the overlapping roles I have occupied as philosopher, farm worker, community member, and market commissioner.

Rather than offering a settled account, I use these cases to ask how socially engaged philosophers should handle forms of insight that emerge from ordinary participation, friendship, institutional involvement, and practical intervention. I suggest that accidental ethnography is not an unusual edge case, but a recurring feature of philosophical work that takes lived practices seriously.

## 14. Marie Lippert

### **Narrating Exhaustion – Exhausted Narration: The Case of ME/CFS**

“Exhausted is a whole lot more than tired. [...] The tired has only exhausted realization, while the exhausted exhausts all of the possible. The tired can no longer realize, but the exhausted can no longer possibilitate.” (Deleuze, *The Exhausted*, 1992, p. 3)

Chronic illnesses within the spectrum of so-called chronic fatigue syndromes, such as ME/CFS and Long COVID, give rise to experiences in which the possible itself becomes unstable, the capacity to anticipate or plan future actions being profoundly compromised. People living with ME/CFS experience neurocognitive symptoms, above all post-exertional malaise (PEM), a delayed worsening of symptoms after even minimal physical, cognitive, or emotional exertion. Nevertheless, reducing ME/CFS to a mere fatigue syndrome risks obscuring the complexity of the condition, thereby reproducing the clinical and institutional misunderstandings already confronted by patients. The talk focuses instead on the ways exhaustion is institutionally mediated and on how patients themselves are exhausted by medical structures. We will argue that the case of ME/CFS is thus revelatory for a philosophical analysis of the notion of exhaustion, while also exposing the limits of a purely philosophical account and the necessity to pay attention to the patients' lived experience.

Yet, this attention is complicated precisely because the ability to give testimony is itself precarious. Post-exertional malaise can be triggered by the very act of narrating. It not only makes narration difficult but can render it harmful, creating a tension between telling one's experience of exhaustion and exhausting oneself through the act of telling. This raises the question of how researchers and medical professionals should confront the problem of speaking for patients, and whether what is needed is rather a rethinking of the temporality of testimony, following the intermittent or retrospective capacity for narration. We will try to highlight the challenges of ethnography in clinical contexts, where practices of observation intersect with clinical intervention and thus with potentially violent institutional practices, and examine the stakes of this undertaking in situations where testimony is both fragile and physiologically costly.

## 15. Xiaoyi Tang

### **In, Not Merely About, the World: Ethnography, Senior Theatre, and Philosophical Critique in a Time of Humanities Crisis**

This paper examines what philosophical critique can still do in a time of humanities crisis, when philosophy is increasingly pressured either to retreat into abstraction or to justify itself through measurable social impact. Drawing on my embedded role as a PhD student in ethics and an organizer-facilitator in arts-and-aging projects at the Chinese University of Hong Kong since 2023, I approach senior theatre not as an empirical case to which philosophy is applied, but as a site where philosophical concepts are practically generated, contested, and revised.

Through ethnographic vignettes from rehearsals, backstage negotiations, performances, and informal conversations, the paper shows how older participants raise concrete normative questions about aging, care, fairness, visibility, representation, time, and participation. Their practical judgments challenge abstract accounts of agency, justice, and critique, while also making visible the philosopher's own precarious critical agency within institutional, affective, and caregiving relations. I argue that ethnographic

engagement offers a normatively demanding way to rethink the mission of philosophy: not as external commentary on the world, but as a situated, responsible practice of thinking in the world.

## 16. Lisa Guenther

### **Following Anabaptists: An ethnography of the unobservable**

In early modern Europe, as many as five thousand Anabaptists were executed, and thousands more were displaced. To my knowledge, there are no public memorials to this religious political violence. As an unobservant Mennonite, I travelled last spring to several sites of Anabaptist life and death in Flanders, Germany, Poland and the Netherlands, observing the scant traces of Anabaptist history in these places and leaving behind a trail of handmade collage cards as an ephemeral memorial to those whose traces were no longer observable. This paper describes my research “in an ethnographic key” (Longo and Zacka 2019) as a practice of both following my ancestors and creating a path to follow. This practice raises philosophical questions about the structure of intergenerational time and our ethical relation to past generations.