

CONVENORS

Olivia Angé – *University of Brussels*

David Nally – *University of Cambridge*

Tuberous Collectivities

KEYNOTES

Rebecca Earle – *University of Warwick*

James Scott – *Yale University*

Marilyn Strathern – *University of Cambridge*

PARTICIPANTS

Francesca Bray – *University of Edinburgh*

Ludovic Coupaye – *University College London*

Helen Curry – *University of Cambridge*

Lewis Daly – *University College London*

Roy Ellen – *University of Kent*

Patrick Joyce – *University of Manchester*

Eben Kirksey – *Deakin University*

Mark Mosko – *Australian National University*

Deirdre O'Mahony – *Artist and Researcher, Kilkenny*

Nancy Ries – *Colgate University*

Richard Scaglion – *University of Pittsburgh*

Aså Sonjasdotter – *University of Gothenburg, Artist*

Michael Uzendoski – *Flacso, Equator*

Karl Zimmerer – *Pennsylvania State University*

An Interdisciplinary Exploration
into Human-Tuber Companionship
across Histories

14th & 15th
MARCH 2022

JESUS COLLEGE
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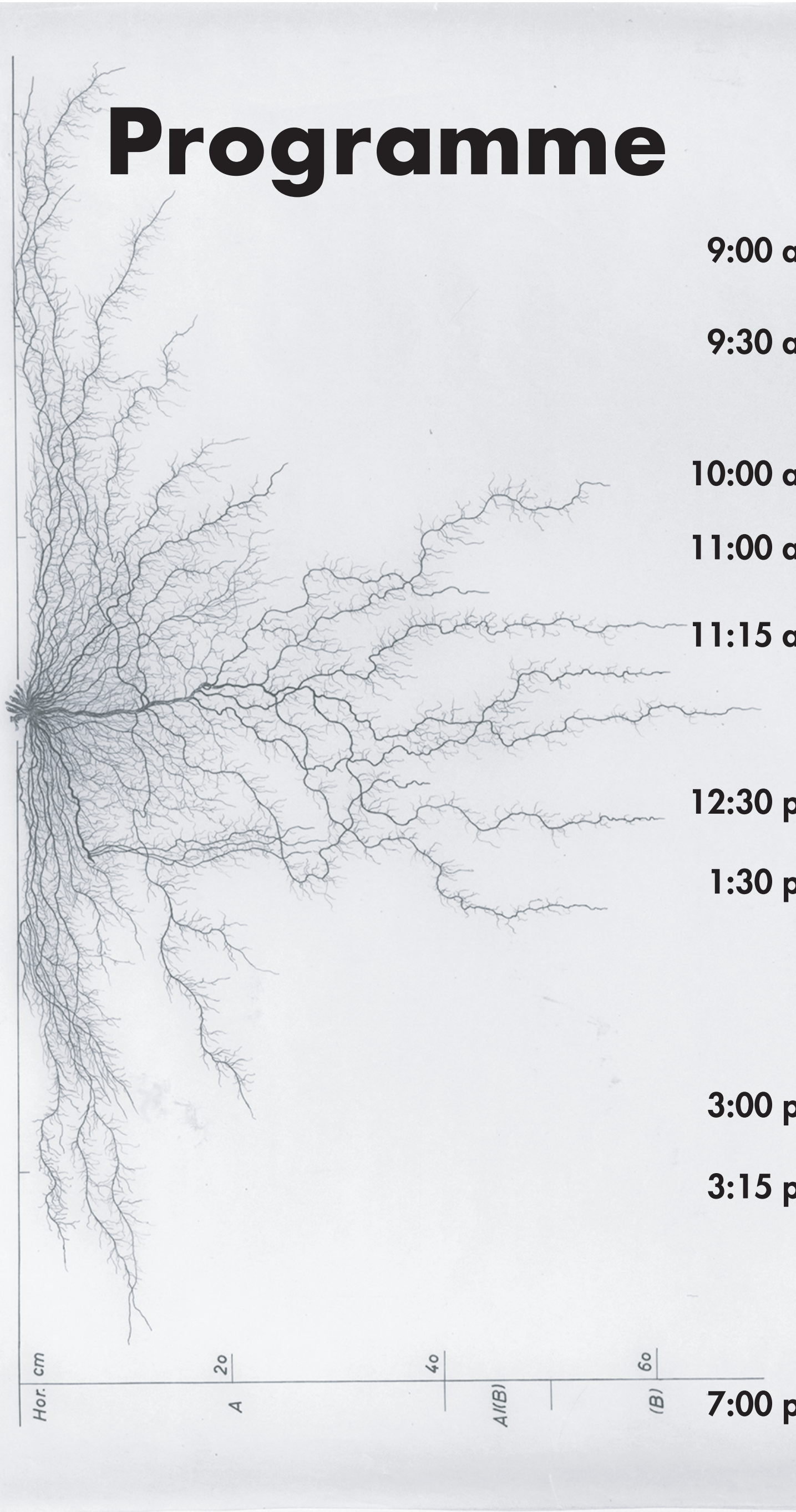


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Programme

MONDAY, 14 MARCH 2022

- 9:00 am **Welcome**
- 9:30 am **Opening Remarks**
Olivia Ange and David Nally
- 10:00 am **Keynote by Professor Rebecca Earle**
- 11:00 am COFFEE
- 11:15 am **Andean Potato**
Karl Zimmerer
Olivia Angé
- 12:30 pm LUNCH
- 1:30 pm **European Potato I**
David Nally
Patrick Joyce
Nancy Ries
- 3:00 pm COFFEE
- 3:15 pm **European Potato II**
Deirdre O'Mahony
Åsa Sonjassdoter
Francesca Bray
- 7:00 pm DINNER AT THANH PINH

TUESDAY, 15 MARCH 2022

- 9:00 am **Keynote by Professor Marilyn Strathern**
- 10:00 am **Yam**
Mark Mosko
Ludovic Coupaye
- 11:00 am COFFEE
- 11:15 am **Sweet Potato**
Richard Scaglione
Helen Curry

Discussant – Eben Kirksey
- 12:30 pm LUNCH
- 1:30 pm **Manioc / Cassava**
Michel Uzendoski
Lewis Daly
Roy Ellen
- 3:00 pm **Keynote by Professor James C Scott**
- 4:00 pm COFFEE AND ROUNDTABLE
- 5:00 pm CONFERENCE CLOSE

Abstracts

James C Scott

Title: *Escape Crops*

Certain forms of subsistence are more resistant to state capture and appropriation than others. The most resistant form is, of course, hunting and gathering in which the actors are mobile, their sources of subsistence scattered, diverse, and seasonal and the ‘storage’ minimal. Swidden cultivation is perhaps the next most resistant. The practitioners are mobile, the fields they cultivate shift over time, and the cultivars are numerous and ripen at different times in the year. Pastoralists are also resistant to state appropriation owing to their mobility and that of their flocks and herds. For sedentary cultivators, where the practitioners live in quasi-permanent settlements and tend fixed fields, here are at least two important distinctions in levels of resistance to appropriation: those who primarily plant roots and tubers and those who primarily plant cereal grains. The former are more resistant to appropriation due largely to the fact that their crops grow underground, can be harvested over a two or three year period, store poorly, have low value per unit weight and volume, and are difficult to seize without a great expenditure of labor (i.e., digging them up). Cereal grains by contrast grow above ground, the bounty of the harvest is easier to assess in advance, and the grains are usually threshed and stored in bulk in a granary. They are, therefore, most easily seized by the state tax-man OR, for that matter, mobile raiders. What is often overlooked is the fact that, historically, forms of subsistence are not ecological “givens” but have frequently been a political choice made and adjusted in view of the desirability of escaping state appropriation.

Karl Zimmerer

Title: *Agrobiodiversity Beyond the Rhizome: From Fugitive Landscapes to Imperial Collections, International Food Mega-Star, Global Climate Change, and Conservation-Development Projects*

This paper presents an analysis of how the biodiversity of land use and food (agrobiodiversity) is embedded in the histories and present-day dynamics of both the “fugitive landscapes” of resistance and resilience and the imperial projects and expanding global agendas of states and international agencies. It is focused on the agrobiodiversity of potatoes, other main tuber crops of the Andes mountains, and a few key seed-producing cultivated plants. A subset of Andean potatoes historically became a world crop while cultivation and consumption of several other crops has continued to co-evolve only regionally. This focus is designed to examine the historical and geographic roles of tuberous collectivities in diverse roles ranging from rhizomatous resistance and resilience to beyond-the-rhizome functions and modalities. The first section discusses intermixed human-plant, food, and market dynamics of this agrobiodiversity based on research with indigenous peasant farmers and organizations in Peru who have been participating in a pair of major new field projects (2016-19; 2020-24). It differentiates rhizome-like as well as non-rhizomatous spaces using Deleuze and Guattari-type concepts. This perspective is then applied to agrobiodiversity in the histories of fugitive and imperial landscapes since European colonial and Inca rule in central Peru. This area has long been a center of interdisciplinary research and is well suited to new analysis. The third section integrates new insights into the longue durée human-environmental and ecological-evolutionary histories embedded in rhizomatous and beyond-the-rhizome capacities. The fourth section uses the preceding analysis to reflect on recent issues of agrobiodiversity, food, climate change, and conservation-development projects and agendas globally. The conclusion reflects on theory-building and concepts illuminated by the examples, case studies, and perspective of “agrobiodiversity beyond the rhizome”.

Olivia Angé

Title: *Becoming a Potato Community in the Highlands of the Peruvian Andes*

Comunidad papera (potato community) is a Spanish expression used by cultivators of the Cuzco region (Peru) to delineate groups of kin whose reproduction rests on the cultivation of a huge diversity of tubers. In its center of domestication, potato is indeed a keystone of agricultural and food practices. Yet, in these highlands, tubers are not only crops to be produced and ingested. They are entangled in human kinship as both mother and child. Exploring this tuberous companionship from the perspective of Peircean semiotics highlights flouriness as a potato qualia crucial to the making of the comunidad papera. This qualia reveals contrasted appreciations of native and improved varieties, and their differentiated participation to the making of highland tuberous collectivities. Considering flouriness in the study of human-tuber relatedness sheds new light on potato qualification as an “escape crop” (James Scott 2017) and on the integration of the potato community to the national society.

David Nally

Title: *Colonialism and the Political Ecology of the Potato in Ireland*

Scholars have argued that the arrival of potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) heralded a series of grand revolutions — stimulating unprecedented population growth (Langer 1963), a new industrial order (McNeill 1948; Salaman 2000), and mass urbanisation (Nunn and Qian 2011). Yet in Ireland the potato is forever associated with hardship and hunger on a staggering scale (Ó Gráda 2009; Nally 2011). During the famine years (1845–1850) more than one million souls perished and a further two million people emigrated in the ensuing decade. In other words, in a short space of time Ireland lost nearly one third of its pre-famine population (estimated at 8.5 million). The potato

blight (phytophthora infestans) that destroyed Ireland’s harvest affected many parts of western Europe, but only in Ireland, and to lesser extent Scotland (Devine 1988), did crop disease trigger starvation on a grand scale. Drawing from co-produced research with Gerry Kearns (Nally and Kearns 2020) this paper will ask: Why did the same crop in different places produce such divergent social and ecological pressures? Using Gibson’s (1979) concept of ‘affordances’, the paper will also show how colonial relations generated a unique milieu that saw the potato adopted first as a hedge against plunder and scarcity and later as furnisher of cheap subsistence that paradoxically enabled what Sassen (2014) terms ‘reinvented mechanisms of primitive accumulation’.

Patrick Joyce

Title: *The Eater and the Eaten*

What I will present are some thoughts coming out of my forthcoming book, Remembering Peasants, due with Allen Lane/ Penguin Press, 2023. The book is not an “academic” one but is I hope scholarly. It concerns the “end” of the European peasantry, how we have forgotten the peasant past, what we have forgotten, and how we remember now, if it is remembering we do at all. I begin with the brilliant essay of John Berger from the 1970s, “The eater and the eaten”. I reprise this. The essay turns around the rhetorical tactic of the opposition of the bourgeois/peasant as eaters (one consumes, the other eats), and takes in the rural/urban, plenty/scarcity themes. At the centre of Berger’s argument are his lines, “The peasant way of eating is centred on the act of eating itself and on the food eaten. For the peasant eating is centripetal and physical. Whereas the bourgeois way of eating is centred on fantasy, ritual and spectacle. Eating is centrifugal and cultural. The first act that of the peasant, completes itself in satisfaction; the second is never complete and gives rise to an appetite which is its essence insatiable.” In an age, ours, where food has become entertainment, one may ask who is the bourgeois now? Eating is a means,

for Berger and for me, of exploring a peasant culture now almost gone, and then using what understanding of it that can be gleaned as a way of presenting both its distance from and its importance for the kind of life we have now. However, I write more for the dead than the living, discharging a debt. I draw mostly on Poland, but also Italy and Ireland, where my “people” are from, and consider, necessarily briefly: food and ritual; dignity and food; food and houses; scarcity and food; the body that eats.

Nancy Ries

Title: *Household Potato Growing across Postsocialist Eurasia*

Across a monumental swath of Eurasia, from Murmansk in the Arctic Circle to Turkmenistan in Central Asia, from easternmost Siberia to Czechia and Lithuania now in the European Union, people grow potatoes in household and allotment gardens, mostly for their own families’ consumption. This vast activity of potato cultivation takes place in urban and peri-urban “dacha” gardens and tiny family plots in rural villages attached to former or still-functioning Soviet-style collective farms. Largely invisible within the surveillance sphere of market-centered global agro-economics, household potato-growing practice is both nutritionally significant for many citizens of post-Soviet and postsocialist societies, as well as being a core of many highly valued collective systems of activity, meaning, memory, reciprocity, and discourse. Postsocialist potato-growing practices are remarkably similar wherever examined; potato practice are determined by the botanical nature of this tuberous species, as well as by shared historical trajectories and political systems arising in response to WWII era and postwar food shortages. Potato-growing occurs within diverse suites of vegetable, fruit, mushroom, and animal production, gathering, and sharing but is arguably a crucial heart of those production systems in many regions. Drawing on my own ethnographic work on potato in Russia, and the significant corpus of scholarship on post-socialist household food pro-

duction, this paper interrogates the widespread persistence of non-market potato growing with an eye to contextualizing its local and national practices and meanings within the larger frames of semi-shared experience through which potato practices became entrenched and widespread. Anthropologists, social historians, geographers, and other social scientists have considered potato-centered family-scale gardening in postsocialist Eurasia through a myriad of lenses but with a significant focus on the exclusion, precarity, and food insecurity which may lead to self-provisioning; some recent studies from Central and Eastern Europe reframe these practices in terms of invisible non-market agriculture and “quiet” sustainability. This paper surveys some of the most interesting recent scholarship across the entire postsocialist region. It focuses on a key analytical tension: on the one hand, a need to probe authoritarian regime promotion of (and reliance on) household potato production as a buffer against widespread food insecurity and political disaffection; and on the other hand, sustained familial lifestyle choices which center on self-produced, traceable, reliable “clean” food and the autonomy and enjoyment potato-growing may seem to provide. Even in the same contexts, household potato growing may signal both exclusion from sources of income and fiscal security and agentive assertions of autonomy in relation to economic, political, and food systems seen as unreliable, corrupt, and “dirty.”

Deirdre O’Mahony

Title: *The SPUD Project: Material Speculations on Absent Histories*

This presentation will outline a public art project, SPUD, that considered the legacy of colonial violence, tacit cultivation knowledge and traditional agriculture, in Ireland and beyond. Emerging from a previous artwork, “X-PO”, in a disused rural post office, this public artwork revived the building as a social and cultural space, allowing largely invisible aspects of rural life to find form through collaborative archival installations, exhibitions and public events. As X-PO developed, the idea formed to create an informal archive of ways and words for

growing potatoes. This led to SPUD, a decade-long project that mapped the complex history and legacy of the potato both in Ireland and beyond. The Great Famine still casts a shadow on Ireland's land and land use regulation. SPUD highlighted the affective power of the potato, surfacing unacknowledged subjectivities around identity and otherness, attitudes to rural life, labour and tacit knowledge. Collaborative plantings with members of the Irish Loy (foot plough) Association drew on the history of Land Art to highlight sites of trauma and techniques for making potato ridges that transform grass into vegetable plots within Irish cultural institutions. International feast events recreated French scientist Antoine Augustin Parmentier's potato dinner for prominent public figures in eighteenth-century France; pamphlets and an animation demonstrated how to grow potatoes, and international collaborations with other artists on the global influence of the potato today. The project culminated as a moving image installation reflecting colonial trauma and the normalization of 'slow violence' that culminated in the Great Famine in an immersive, two-screen projection, *The Persistent Return*.

Åsa Sonjasdotter

Title: *On Traditional Methods for Plant Breeding as Relationality beyond Modern-Colonial Categories of 'Nature' and 'Culture'*

This paper presents a series of artistic projects mobilising towards the recognition and rehabilitation of traditional methods for breeding of potatoes and further crops. In difference to modern plant breeding, which is undertaken within concealed laboratory environments for the development of so-called 'pure-line' varieties, traditional breeding occurs as an integral dimension of the cultivation. It emerges in entanglement with the surrounding habitat, which the inserted crops transform, and are transformed by. The term 'traditional' in this context refers to the etymological base of the term, which mean 'to trade', 'to exchange'. To keep the tubers and seeds in flux through exchange helps

keeping the stock vital. Further, the sharing and spreading of the emerging crop variation is the traditional way of safeguarding the knowledge accumulated in the tubers and the seeds. By elaborating traditional practices and narratives of breeding and cultivation, the presented artistic projects open towards ontological and epistemological relationality and temporality beyond modern-colonial categories of 'nature' and 'culture'. The notion of 'cultivation' here, describes the way humans always already are part of co-nurturing more-than-human relations. As tubers do not store much longer than from one season to the other, traditionally bred and cultivated potato varieties emerge and re-emerge through intimate connectivity in thick space and time. In the artistic projects, this special form for extended entanglement is poetically and speculatively elaborated in regards of nurturing relations away from modern-colonial conception.

Francesca Bray

Title: *Underground Inspirations: Thinking with Tubers in History and Social Science*

What kinds of story do we tell about tubers, those underground tangles of swollen roots or rhizomes that sustain millions yet so easily escape the notice of scientists, or of historians trained to focus on waving seas of wheat and other grand global crops that sustained the rise of our modern world? In history of science, for instance, tubers were invisible until very recently. Other fields, including anthropology, archaeology and environmental history, have been thinking with tubers and building theories around human-tuber relations for some time, but in very different contexts. My paper discusses how and why different ways of knowing-through-tubers have been formulated, traces some influential lineages and linkages between fields, and asks how tuber tales might further inspire historians.

Marilyn Strathern

Title: *'A Question of Life and Death': Imagining Tropical Tubers*

In turning to the historically iconic cultivars of tropical Melanesia, taro and yam, this account unfolds in three stages. First, it offers an emphatic endorsement of the conference's interest in tuber-human relatedness, drawing on an ethnographic context that often renders relations in a recognizably kinship form. Second, it responds to the accompanying interest in the larger picture of tuber (re)production, and points to some issues raised by the specificity of certain propagation practices. Third, these issues provoke a return to ideas of kinship, now emerging in a less recognizable form, in which dying is integral to living. This in turn gives a twist to the whole conception of tuberous relations.

Mark S. Mosko

Title: *The Sacrifice of the Yams*

Bronislaw Malinowski's comprehensive account of Trobriand Islanders' (Papua New Guinea) cultural fixation on taitu yams (*Dioscorea esculenta*), their chief traditional cultivar, is comparable to Evans-Pritchard's classic description of Nuer (South Sudanese) people's all-consuming 'cattle culture,' except for one crucial detail: failing to appreciate the 'sacrificial' (bwekasa) dynamics of the indigenous religion and the key role that yams therein fulfill beyond their economic, political or even kinship functions. Based on recent research at Omara-kana village, the site of Malinowski's path-breaking studies, I outline how ancestral baloma spirits participate alongside their living descendants in virtually every phase of yam cultivation, exchange and consumption. As core mediators in those relations, yams serve systematically as the principal ritual offerings by which living people and spirits reciprocally give 'life' (momova) to each other. In so doing, yams are central to the reproduction and maintenance of the imagined cosmos. Yams as tubers possess these capacities in view of the distinctive quasi-human, 'meta-personal' qualities that Islanders attribute to them.

Ludovic Coupaye

Title: *Tubers as Paradigmatic Containers*

Yam, like other tubers, present cultivators with particular properties and behaviours. Their capacity for a vegetative mode of reproduction implies that, as Isaac H. Burkill noticed long ago (1951:444), they are not only clones of one another, but are in fact the same very ancient vegetal being, distributed over a large number of instantiations. This paper explores whether this distributed vegetal dividual could be considered as a vernacular paradigm for a form of indigenous social imagination, using the case of Abulès-Speaker (“Abelam”) of Nyamikum village. It does so by examining the behaviour, properties and capacities of the plants and the tubers to act as containers of both past relations and future potentialities distributed among cultivators. Building on this hypothesis, I explore how such “tuberous” social imagination is not only non-directly verbalised but also distributed and displayed in other forms, such as decorated tubers, but also architecture and in the now absent, but previously rich, visual production.

Richard Scaglion

Title: *The Sweet Potato: Stimulating Agricultural Innovation in the Pacific Islands*

Botanists agree that the sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*) is a cultivar that originated in the New World, probably in South America. Yet when European explorers first reached the Pacific Islands, sweet potatoes had already become a staple food in many places. How did this American tuber find its way into the Pacific? How did it spread across this vast ocean? How did it supplement existing food inventories? For the most part, traditional Pacific foods were Old World staples well adapted to tropical lowland environments. Being tubers, sweet potatoes were familiar crops, but they provided favorable new opportunities. Growing well at altitude in drier upland environments and being

tolerant of both poor and agriculturally degraded soils, sweet potatoes allowed for exploitation of previously underutilized ecozones that included the upland leeward slopes of large Hawaiian islands and parts of the temperate North Island of New Zealand/Aotearoa. In Highland New Guinea, they triggered an “Ipomoean revolution” that generated large, dense populations in the previously sparsely settled interior. Crowded mountain valleys astonished the first European explorers to reach the Highlands in the 1930s. Monocropping sweet potatoes in the New Guinea Highlands has only increased in recent decades, with production now exceeding 1,000 kg/person/year. Traditional New Guinea Highland societies displayed many of the characteristics that archaeologists predict lead to complex social forms, yet they maintained uncompromising egalitarian practices. Why? This paper explores the relationship between Pacific Island populations and sweet potatoes through time and space.

Helen Anne Curry

Title: *Round, Obovate, Long-Elliptic: Organising International Sweet Potato Research and Conservation in the 1980s and Beyond*

The organisation of sweet potato research across global regions began in earnest in the 1980s. Leading international institutions, notably CGIAR (then the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research) recognised the potential for science-driven development of a "neglected" crop. As "the world's most underrated crop," sweet potato was second only to potato in root crop cultivation worldwide and the top tuber in Asia, yet had not been subject to the kind of internationally coordinated research that its importance merited. In this paper, I explore how scientists and institutions attempted to create a cross-border, cross-institution sweet potato–research community. I focus in particular on ambitions for—and challenges to—a universally agreed upon set of crop descriptors for sweet potato. The elaboration of crop descriptors had become a key component of CGIAR and other international

research efforts in the 1970s. These were initially imagined as pared-down, standardized, crop-specific "minimal" lists of descriptors (e.g., for sweet potato, "storage root shape," "mature leaf shape," "flower color") and descriptor values (e.g., for sweet potato storage root shape, "round," "obovate," "long-elliptic"). Crop descriptor lists were envisioned as means to facilitate the exchange, evaluation, and conservation of breeding materials, especially through their deployment in computerized databases. By the late 1980s, the costs of minimalism and the impossibilities of universalism drove crop descriptor development towards more inclusive and flexible terms; sweet potato researchers led the way towards a new maximalist interpretation. As I argue, the history of sweet potato research—and of successive efforts to generate static labels for a culturally, genetically and ecologically mobile species—exemplifies the social, political, institutional, and biological obstacles to the internationalization of crop science in the late twentieth century.

Michael A. Uzendoski

Title: *Manioc and Modernity: Consumptive Personhood and changing relationships between humans and tubers in Napo Province of Amazonian Ecuador*

In this paper I will discuss how the relationship among manioc and people in Amazonian Kichwa societies has changed in relationship to processes of modernity and the intensification of capitalistic activities in the region. Among Amazonian societies manioc (yuca) has, for thousands of years, been the main dietary substance upon which bodies and social relations have been built up and sustained. Scholars have analogized manioc to other great crops of civilization like corn, wheat, and rice but the Amazonian manioc complex has particular characteristics that have shaped not only the social practices of Amazonian peoples but also their symbolic relationship to the earth. The symbolic and social power of manioc is its association with feminine

powers of reproduction and life-giving, and manioc traditionally defined women’s bodies with fermented manioc-beer as well as the gardens. In short, manioc has historically been the bedrock of personhood the identity. Globalization, however, has altered local notions of value in that rice, once a foreign food crop, has now been internalized as a main staple of the diet. Similarly, bottled beer has displaced manioc beer as the preferred drink of men. My paper thus presents an analysis showing how the sphere of manioc production and its conversion into manioc beer still remains central to Amazonian life, but now is fully articulated with the capitalist spheres of food production and consumption surrounding rice and beer. The implications of this value transformation are that new Amazonian consumption patterns have debilitated traditional notions of value, personhood, and identities, and reflect a general shift of these cultures towards modern identities and consumptive behaviors while fostering greater dependence on market relations.

Lewis Daly

Title: *How Gardens Think: Notes on Human-Plant Substance Sharing in Amazonian Gardening*

This paper concerns the practice of cassava gardening among the indigenous Makushi people of Amazonian Guyana. By focusing on the cassava garden (mĩĩ) as a primary site of multispecies engagement, I explore some of the heterogeneous modes that people–plant relationships take in everyday life and ritual practice. Plants, for the Makushi, are typically thought of as ‘persons’ (pemon), and gardening is predicated upon maintaining relationships of interspecies care via regular human–plant communication. In the idiom of human kinship, cassava plants are spoken of as being ‘children’ (more yamĩ’), both of human gardeners and Cassava Mama, the tutelary spirit of cultivated plants. Human–plant communication is both verbal, in the form of poetic language (taren) and songs (eremu), and embodied, in the form

of tactile engagement and substance-based transfers. Roots, bulbs, and other fleshy storage organs are particularly pertinent in this regard. It is in the cultivation of embodied, communicative relationships with plants and their spirits, I posit, that Makushi gardeners create and nourish human persons and, ultimately, reproduce society in relationship with outside forces. I go on to address the anthropological problem of plant animism in Amazonia, arguing that a more embodied, sensorial and, following Strathern, ‘immanentist’ notion of spirit is required to better account for the complex entanglement of bodies and souls that undergirds human–plant interpenetration in indigenous Amazonia. In dialogue with literature from the multispecies turn, I suggest that an anthropology beyond the human, much like Makushi gardening, might usefully be thought of as a continual process of more-than-human ontogenesis.

Roy Ellen

Title: *Cassava and Colonialism: How a Diasporic Cultigen was Reinvented in the World System*

The process by which cassava became domesticated and cultivated by humans in northwest Amazonia, and by which it spread to other parts of tropical America took some thousands of years. It involved many opportunities for social and cultural practices to reinforce a distinctive co-evolutionary process. However, the socio-ecological collision between old and new worlds that occurred 500 years ago released cassava into a world system with possibilities and consequences very different from those it had thus far encountered. Under the new dispensation, cassava became the sustaining food of first plantation workers, slaves, and thereafter the preferred crop of poor people living in arid and degraded environments, in addition to colonial regimes seeking to feed subject populations. This paper seeks to interpret this history. It additionally seeks to explain how the narrow germplasm base and social knowledge initially available to those who

sort to take advantage of it was, over a much shorter period, reinvented and re-diversified in ways seldom reliably the same as those in the areas of endemism. This happened in new environments and socio-economic situations, where often cassava was replacing pre-existing crops with equally long local biocultural histories. I argue that the ethnobiological profile of a crop depends on a concatenation of ecological and socio-cultural circumstances rarely usefully distinguished by gross second order categories (e.g. grain vs tuber) convenient in polemical debate, and which bear little resemblance to how cultural adaptation and evolutionary biology work in complex social contexts.

Rebecca Earle

Title: *Poetry, Philosophy and Potatoes*

What do we talk about when we talk about potatoes? Most of the time, potatoes are a byword for ordinary. Potatoes are dependable, a trustworthy staple, which today are eaten all over the world. But potatoes also tell stories about who we are, about family, and about our links to the cosmos. This talk explores some of these stories, from the poetry of Seamus Heaney to the potato’s role in War and Peace.

Biographies

Olivia Angé is an Associate Professor at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, principal investigator of the ERC Starting Grant Flourishing Seeds. She specialises in the study of economic exchanges, agriculture and prosperity in the Andes. Since 2014 she has been investigating potato agriculture in Peru. She has also performed extensive fieldwork on barter fairs in the Argentinean cordillera. She is the author of *Barter and Social Regeneration in the Argentinean Andes* (Berghahn, 2021 2nd ed.), and co-editor of *Ecological Nostalgias and Anthropology and Nostalgia* (Berghahn, 2014 and 2021).

Francesca Bray is Emerita Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh, is a historian of science, technology and medicine in East Asia, specialising in gender and technology, the politics of historiography, and the history of agriculture and food. Recent books include *Technology, Gender and History in Imperial China* (2013); and *Rice: Global Networks and New Histories* (2015). Tubers feature prominently in her latest project, a co-authored book, *Moving Crops and the Scales of History* (in press).

Helen Anne Curry is Associate Professor in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Cambridge and a fellow of Churchill College. Her current recent centres on the histories of seeds, crop science, and industrial agriculture. She is author of *Evolution Made to Order: Plant Breeding and Technological Innovation in Twentieth Century America* (University of Chicago Press, 2016) and

Endangered Maize: Industrial Agriculture and the Crisis of Extinction (University of California Press, 2022). From 2020–2025, she leads the multi-researcher project, 'From Collection to Cultivation: Historical Perspectives on Crop Diversity and Food Security', funded by the Wellcome Trust.

Lewis Daly is a Lecturer in Social Anthropology of the Environment at UCL. He completed his doctorate (DPhil) in Anthropology at the University of Oxford in 2015, focusing on indigenous environmental knowledge and practices in the savannahs and rainforests of northern Amazonia. Lewis has conducted over two years of ethnographic fieldwork with Makushi communities in southern Guyana, focusing primarily on multispecies engagements in the indigenous culture and cosmology. He has a particular interest in agriculture, and has written about root crops including bitter cassava. His research is framed by an appraisal of the impact of conservation, ecotourism, and sustainable development on Makushi lifeways and environmental practices. Lewis has conducted postdoctoral research projects with the Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi (MPEG) in Belém, Brazil, and the Ethno-ornithology World Atlas (EWA) at the University of Oxford. He is also the founder and co-editor of TEA: The Ethnobotanical Assembly, an open-access online journal about people-plant relationships.

Rebecca Earle is a historian of food. She recently completed a ridiculously extended project on the global history of the potato, which considers both the processes that led to the Andean potato becoming a major global foodstuff, and also the historical origins of the concept of food security. Before Potatoes (B.P.) she worked on food's role in shaping colonial Spanish American culture, the use of the indigenous past in the construction of nationalist narratives in postcolonial Spanish America, and the wars of independence in early nineteenth-century Spanish America. She's also written about the intersections between clothing and identity, early modern travel, love letters, and other topics. Her next research project was going to explore what we can learn

from recipes other than how to cook, but she's been diverted into tracing the history of some unusual Mexican 'casta' paintings that made their way to the UK in the eighteenth century.

Roy Ellen is Emeritus Professor of Anthropology and Human Ecology at the University of Kent at Canterbury. His main anthropological work has been conducted in Indonesia, principally in the Moluccan islands. His recent books include *Kinship, population and social reproduction in the 'new Indonesia': a study of Nuauulu cultural resilience* (2018), *The Nuauulu world of plants: ethnobotanical cognition, knowledge and practice among a people of Seram, eastern Indonesia* (2020) and *Nature wars: essays around a contested concept* (2021). He is a Fellow of the British Academy, past President of the Royal Anthropological Institute, and in 2017 received the Distinguished Ethnobotanist award from the Society for Economic Botany.

Patrick Joyce is Emeritus Professor of History in the University of Manchester and a leading social historian who has published in the area of history and materiality in *The Rule of Freedom* (Verso, 2013), *Material Powers* (Routledge), and *The State of Freedom* (CUP, 2013). More recently he has published a memoir/history with Verso, *Going to My Father's House* (2021), and is writing for Penguin *Remembering Peasants*.

Deirdre O'Mahony studied at Saint Martins College of Art & Design, London, the Crawford College of Art, Cork, and the University of Brighton, completing a PhD in Fine Art in 2012. Her art practice is informed by a deep interest in rural sustainability, farming, food security and the political ecology of rural places. Recent projects and exhibitions include *Sustainment Experiments* (2021 – 2024 in Ireland and Paris, the Gangwon Triennale Korea(2021), *POST_*(2020) for Galway European Capital of Culture 2020 and the 2021 EVA International Biennale Guest Programme. A recipient of international awards, including the Irish American Cultural Institute O'Malley Award

(2018), a Pollock-Krasner Fellowship and numerous awards from the Arts Council of Ireland, she is currently the Earth Science Institute artist in residence at University College Dublin. Her artwork is in the Arts Council of Ireland collection and national and international institutions.

Mark S. Mosko is Emeritus Professor of Anthropology in the College of Asia and the Pacific. Over five decades, he has conducted extensive ethnographic research among the North Mekeo and Trobriand peoples of Papua New Guinea. Along with numerous articles and chapters, he has authored *Quadripartite Structures: Categories, Relations and Homologies in Bush Mekeo Culture* (Cambridge UP 1985), *Ways of Baloma: Rethinking Magic and Kinship from the Trobriands* (U Chicago Press 2017) and (co-edited with Fred Damon) *On the Order of Chaos* (Berghahn Books 2005). His essay, "Partible Penitents: Dividual Personhood and Christian Practice in Melanesia and the West" was awarded the Royal Anthropological Institute's 2008 Curl Prize.

David Nally is Associate Professor and Geographer at the University of Cambridge with research interests in food politics, histories of the British empire, and the historical geography of American philanthropy. Nally is the author of *Human Encumbrances: Political Violence and the Great Irish Famine* (University of Notre Dame Press 2011) and co-author of *Key Concepts in Historical Geography* (Sage 2014; with John Morrissey, Ulf Strohmayer and Yvonne Whelan). In addition to his department and college roles, Dr Nally was also a founding member of a International Research Centre on 'Global Food Security' that presently connects more than 160 researchers, based in 25 departments, centres and institutes within and beyond the University of Cambridge.

Nancy Ries is Professor of Anthropology and Peace and Conflict Studies at Colgate University. Among her publications are the 2009 article "Potato Ontology: Surviving Post-Socialism in Russia" which won

the Cultural Anthropology Horizons Prize and her 1997 book, *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation during Perestroika*, which won the Barbara Heldt Book Prize. In 2020 she published "Thugocracy: Bandit Regimes and State Capture" in *Safundi*, building on several decades of focus on the Russian mafia and the social impacts of kleptocratic governance. Ries has also written about everyday life theory and traumatic violence, and the banality of annihilationism in Russian nuclear weapons discourse. She was the co-founder of Soyuz: the Research Network for Postsocialist Cultural Studies, co-editor of the Cornell Press series "Culture and Society after Socialism," and she helped create the online museum, "Communal Living in Russia." She is currently extending her work on transnational organized crime and thugocratic governmentality, incorporating the wide spread of potato growing in the postsocialist world into the purview of that research.

Richard Scaglion is Professor Emeritus and former UCIS Research Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh. His broad interests in Pacific Islands Studies include Pacific migration and the relationships between humans and their natural environments. Former director of customary law development for the Law Reform Commission of Papua New Guinea, he has conducted field research with the Abelam people since 1974. His edited books include *Polynesian Outliers: The State of the Art* (with Rick Feinberg) and *The Globalization of Food* (with Leonard Plotnicov).

James C. Scott is Sterling Professor of Political Science and Professor of Anthropology and is co-Director of the Agrarian Studies Program at Yale University. He lives on a farm in Durham, Connecticut and was, for 22 years, a sheep breeder and shearer. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and has been a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, and the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. In 2020, he was awarded the Albert O. Hirschman Prize by the Social Science Research Council. His research concerns political economy, comparative agrarian societies, theories of hegemony and

resistance, peasant politics, revolution, Southeast Asia, theories of class relations and anarchism. His books include *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Yale University Press, 1985, *Weapons of the Weak*, Yale University Press 1980, *Seeing Like a State*, Yale University Press, 1998; *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, (Princeton Press, 2013), *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, Yale Press 2009, and *Against the Grain*, Yale Press 2017. He formally retired in July 2021 and now calls himself "professor demeritus". He is working on an eco-biography of the Ayeyarwady River.

Åsa Sonjasdotter is an artist, researcher, writer, and organiser whose praxis engages in processes of rehabilitation and re-narration of livelihood relations. Through cultivation of outlawed crops and close readings of related archival matter, lost knowledge and imagination is brought into re-existence. Sonjasdotter is a Doctoral Researcher in Artistic Practice at HDK-Valand, the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Her most recent book *Peace with the Earth, Tracing Agricultural Memory – Refiguring Practice* is published by Archive Books in 2019. Sonjasdotter's work is presented and exhibited in numerous international contexts. For further information: asonjasdotter.info.

Marilyn Strathern is Emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology at Cambridge. Her research career began with work on kinship and gender relations, with a Melanesian emphasis, and she is most well known for *The gender of the gift* (1988). She was subsequently involved in anthropological approaches to assisted conception, intellectual property, audit cultures, as well as interdisciplinarity. A recent book is *Relations: an anthropological account* (2020). Visiting Papua New Guinea at a time of unexpected drought (2015) impressed her with the precarity of vegetative reproduction, and has opened up a new chapter of concerns.

Michael Uzendoski has a B.A. in philosophy and literature from the University of Chicago and a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the Univer-

sity of Virginia. Since 2014, he has been Professor and Coordinator of the Master’s Program at the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales of Ecuador (FLACSO) and was also faculty in the Department of Anthropology at Florida State University (2000-2014). He is the author of *The Ecology of the Spoken Word: Storytelling and Shamanism among the Napo Runa* (Illinois Press), and has published dozens of articles in Spanish and English. He has worked and lived among Amazonian Kichwa speakers since 1994 and his research has focused on the social and symbolic complexities of Amazonian life in relation to processes of globalization and modernity.

Karl Zimmerer is a geographer and environmental scientist based in the Department of Geography at Pennsylvania State University. His work is focused on the sustainable utilization and conservation of biodiversity in food and land use (agrobiodiversity), interactions of conservation with development, food and nutrition security (with emphasis on food sovereignty), and the interactions with global-change processes of urbanization, climate change, migration, and global conservation-development initiatives. He works with collaborators and local community groups to understand how agrobiodiversity can be integral to transformative sustainability and sustainable development across spatial scales. His work has included a focus on environment-society theory and approaches to support citizen organizations and networks in sustainable development and conservation-with-development. His recent book publication is *Agrobiodiversity: Integrating Knowledge for*

