

Nikolai Vetr

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EDUCATION

PhD

2020

University of California, Davis

Dissertation: *Exploring and Extending Multivariate Brownian Diffusion Models of Phenotypic Evolution for Bayesian Phylogenetic Inference*

Committee: Tim Weaver (Chair), Shara Bailey, Peter Wainwright, Brian Moore

GPA: 4.0/4.0 — Anthropology; Population Biology; Data Science & Informatics

BA

2013

Vanderbilt University

GPA: 3.9/4.0 — Earth & Environmental Sciences; Ecology, Evolution & Organismal Biology

Departmental Honors, *summa cum laude*

ADDITIONAL EDUCATION

Discussion Groups

2013 - 2020

Active participant in groups on Computational Molecular Evolution, Paleoanthropology, Quantitative Genetics, and Machine Learning. Founder and lead in groups on Python, Applied Linear Algebra, Bayesian Data Analysis, and Deep Learning

Workshops

2013 - 2020

Have attended multiple workshops ranging in duration from 2h to 9d on Universal Design, Science Communication, Bayesian Phylogenetics, Database Management, Natural Language Processing, Carpentries Instructor Training, and other topics

Online Courses

2013 - 2020

In addition to reading textbooks through discussion groups or on my own, I've worked through several online courses, such as Gilbert Strang's *Linear Algebra* (MIT OpenCourseWare 18.06) or Andrew Ng's *Deep Learning Specialization* (Coursera)

LANGUAGES

Programming

Fluent:

Proficient: R, RevBayes, Stan, BASH

Beginner: Python, C++

Natural

Russian, English

Spanish

PROJECTS

DISSERTATION WORK

My dissertation work has primarily centered on Bayesian computational phylogenetics methods development, specifically focused on extending and exploring multivariate Brownian (mvBM) diffusion models to novel applications and contexts. Projects in association with this work have involved:

- through simulation **exploring the informativeness and reliability of continuous character**

alignments at retrieval of simulating tree topology, with subsequent application to a craniometric dataset

- the **effects of model misspecification** in the above, both with respect to the evolutionary process and with respect to accommodating missing data and measurement error
- developing and implementing novel optimizations to **reduce the time complexity** of likelihood calculation under the phylogenetic mvBM model from $O(n^2)$ to $O(n)$, modularizing particular operations to **avoid redundant computation** during Met-Hastings, and inventing substantially **more efficient, tunable proposal distributions** over correlation matrices of arbitrary dimensionality. In total, **reducing the runtime required** to fit this popular evolutionary model under typical empirical conditions from months to hours
- **comparing model-based phylogenetic methods to more common heuristic (maximum parsimony, distance) methods**, both in simulation and empirically (using ape and old-world monkey datasets), and contrasting their performance to methods that use molecular (e.g. nucleotide sequence) data
- **comparison of morphological relaxed clock models** in a species-rich fish dataset whose tree height straddles the K-Pg boundary
- **approximating truncated biogeographic diffusions using data augmentation** on phylogenies to sample migration histories while respecting (land, water) barriers to explore latitudinal / climactic drivers of morphological differentiation in modern humans
- **joint inference of ancestral character states** in a monkey dataset, with additional theory development on imputing unobserved tip characters in a phylogenetically sensible way
- layering a **high-dimensional probit model atop mvBM to accommodate discrete traits** and comparing it with more traditional CTMC (*Continuous Time Markov Chain*) models of discrete trait substitution, with application to hominin dental variation

SIDE PROJECTS

Throughout my PhD, I've undertaken a number of side projects, some of which directly extended my dissertation work to non-evolutionary contexts and some of which used more distantly related methods. These have often been self-motivated, but also sometimes done in collaboration with or response to requests by third parties (e.g. as statistical co-author). These side-projects have included developing, fitting, interpreting, describing, and visualizing results from:

- high-dimensional multilevel generalized linear mixed models (GLMMs; Poisson, in this case) in Stan to **heart transplant patient immune response** data both before and after an acute rejection episode
- multilevel GLMMs in Stan to **consumer dietary and attitudinal response datasets** (zero-inflated Poisson and ordered logit, respectively) measuring the effects of exposure to a relevant advertisement urging dietary change
- a hierarchical univariate Ornstein-Uhlenbeck model in Stan to the 'evolution' of **nitrogen concentrations in manure ponds** across California to predict values after an arbitrary amount of time has passed in an arbitrary pond
- an efficient, conditional multivariate normal model in R that provides **personalized movie rating predictions** (given ratings for some movies and a large-but-sparse dataset of user reviews, what are the expected ratings and variances of unrated movies?) using probit and logit-normal transforms, exploiting basic properties of Schur complements
- a Bayesian ConvNet fitted to **medical (skin lesion & other) image data**, currently in prep for a workshop I'll be hosting through *Data Science & Informatics*

MINOR PROJECTS

I've written many dozens of minor scripts (< 100 LOC) devoted to data visualization, text mining, web scraping, replicating published analyses or algorithms from scratch, and exploring off-the-cuff ideas proposed by myself or colleagues.

I've also consulted individuals & organizations in a minor role (e.g. over a ~ 1h meeting) on many additional projects throughout graduate school.

FIELD & LABWORK

Archaeological / Paleontological Excavator

2013

During the Summer 2013 field season I helped in excavation efforts ongoing at La Ferrassie, a Neandertal archaeological and paleontological site in Savignac-de-Miremont, France

Water Quality Analyst

2011

I performed water quality analyses (of salinity, reactive nitrogen concentration, etc.) of a large set of streams distributed across the North Island of New Zealand

Stable Isotope Ecologist

2012 - 2013

As an undergraduate researcher, I examined how environmental and ecological conditions were recorded in enamel stable isotope ratios (carbon and oxygen) and dental microwear textures for several marsupial taxa throughout Australasia

TEACHING

Associate Instructor*, University of California, Davis

2015 - 2020

As an associate instructor, I've taught three quarters of an upper-division paleoanthropology course, two quarters of an upper-division evolutionary primatology course, and one quarter of an introductory course on human evolution. In these roles, I created or modified all the lab and lecture materials, designed and graded assignments and tests, mentored individual students, delivered lectures, and either supervised teaching assistants or administered and oversaw the labs

Teaching Assistant*, University of California, Davis & Vanderbilt University

2012 - 2020

I have taught a total of 14 discussion sections for the aforementioned human evolution and paleoanthropology courses (see above), as well as the lab for an introductory cell biology course at Vanderbilt University. As a TA, I occasionally gave guest lectures on various subjects (mostly statistical phylogenetics)

Outreach Lecturer, University of California, Davis

2013 - 2020

I've given multiple yearly talks on human evolution to elementary and middle school students on location and visiting UC-Davis, as well as during campus-wide events (e.g. *Picnic Day*). I've also assisted in miscellaneous workshops targetted at adults, e.g. on NLP during UC-D Data Science Health Day

Course Coordinator, Workshop in Applied Phylogenetics

2019

I served as a course coordinator for world-renowned, widely-attended, week-long workshop in applied computational Bayesian phylogenetics held in May 2019 at the Bodega Marine Laboratory

Carpentries Instructor

2019

I have completed Instructor Training and Checkout for The Carpentries organization and am fully certified to teach courses in the Data and Software Carpentries

**student evaluations available upon request*

LEADERSHIP

Founder & Lead, Applied Bayesian Statistics Research Cluster

2019 - 2020

I founded, coordinated, and supervised an interdisciplinary research cluster of 70+ scientists and statisticians across numerous career stages (PhD Student, Postdoc, PI, Industry Researcher), financially and spiritually sponsored by the UC-Davis *Data Science & Informatics Unit*

Director, Board of Directors, Wild Animal Initiative

2020

I serve on the Board of Directors at the *Wild Animal Initiative*, a non-profit dedicated to researching the lives of wild animals. In this role, I help to oversee the organization's activities and policies as described in their mission statement and bylaws

Coordinator, Various Reading Groups

2014 - 2020

I've founded and coordinated reading groups on Python, Applied Linear Algebra, Bayesian Data Analysis, and Deep Learning

PUBLICATIONS

PAPERS

- [1] **Vetr, N.**, Bailey, S., Moore, B., and Weaver, T. 2020. *Phylogenetic Inference under the Multivariate Ordinal Threshold Model: Exploring Performance through Simulation and Application to Human Dentition*. In prep for PLOS ONE.
- [2] **Vetr, N.** and Weaver, T. 2020. *Primate Phylogenetics with Landmark Data: A Model-Based, Multivariate Brownian Approach*. In prep for The Journal of Human Evolution.
- [3] Gates, K., Biendarra-Tiegs, S., **Vetr, N.**, Higuaita, M. Nelson, T., Pereira, N, and Griffiths, L. 2019. *Non-HLA antigens modulate heart transplant dysfunction*. In review by Circulation Research.
- [4] **Vetr, N.**, May, M., Moore, B., and Weaver, T. 2019. *Bayesian Phylogenetic Inference Under Multivariate Brownian Motion*. Awaiting submission to Systematic Biology.
- [5] **Vetr, N.** 2017. *Non-Synapomorphic Traits are Phylogenetically Informative*. In prep.
- [6] **Vetr, N.**, DeSantis, L., Yann, L., et al. 2013. *Is Rapoport's Rule a Recent Phenomenon? A Deep Time Perspective on Potential Causal Mechanisms*. Biology Letters 9(5): 1-5. DOI: 10.1098/rsbl.2013.0398

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

- [1] **Vetr, N.**, May, M. Moore, B., and R. Weaver. 2018 *Adapting multivariate Brownian diffusion models to Bayesian inference of human population history and phylogeny*. Oral session presented at the 87th Annual Meeting of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists.
- [2] Desantis, L., **Lashinsky, N.**, Romer, J., Greshko, M., and Loffredo, L. 2013. *University Students' Acceptance of Climate Change and Evolution: Are Skeptics just Anti- Science?* Poster presented despite second authorship at the 73rd Annual Meeting of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology.
- [3] **Lashinsky, N.**, DeSantis, L. Yann, S. Donohue, and R. Haupt. 2013 *Is Rapoport's Rule a Recent Phenomenon? A Deep Time Perspective on Potential Causal Mechanisms*. Oral session presented at the 73rd Annual Meeting of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology.

- [4] **Lashinsky, N. and DeSantis, L. 2012.** *Assessing how the extant lesser forest-wallaby *Dorcopsulus vanheurni* and Lumholtz's tree kangaroo *Dendrolagus lumholtzi* record their environment: establishing a baseline for studies of extinct marsupials.* Poster presented at the 5th Annual Meeting of the South-eastern Association of Vertebrate Paleontology.

GRANTS & AWARDS

Excellence in Data Science Community Training and Outreach	2019, 2020
Outstanding Graduate Student Teaching Award Nominee	2016, 2019, 2020
Conference Travel Award	2012, 2018
1st Place Picnic Day Exhibit Award in "Secrets of Nature" Category	2017
NSF Graduate Research Fellowship	2015
Summer Research Grant	2014, 2015
Graduate Scholars Fellowship	2013
Departmental Honors in Earth and Environmental Sciences	2013
Eugene H. Vaughan Undergraduate Research Assistantship in Geology	2012
Geology Travel Grant	2012
Vanderbilt Undergraduate Summer Research Grant	2012
Ross Family Scholarship	2012
National Merit Scholarship	2009

SERVICE

JOURNAL ARTICLE REVIEW

Science Communications (2018)

Evolution (2017)

OTHER

Computer Hardware

Familiar with computer assembly and repair. Constructed and networked an 8-node (64C/128T) Ryzen-based Beowulf cluster running macOS for dissertation work, with analyses parallelized using *GNU Parallel*, as well as a portable 5-node Raspberry Pi cluster running Linux. Have designed and assembled similar systems for academic colleagues after consultation on their computational needs

Outdoors

Avid and experienced outdoorsman, having coordinated and lead many hiking, backpacking, and climbing trips of varying group size over distances typically between 50-150km, but ranging upwards to 1,300km, and have also backpacked and hitchhiked through several countries. Sporadically partake in other adventure sports (snowboarding, kayaking, cycling, etc.)

Photography

Hobbyist photographer, graphic designer, and illustrator focusing on portrait, landscape, and wildlife photography, with post-processing typically done in Capture One and Adobe Photoshop and recently augmented with more sophisticated computational tools (e.g. ANNs)