

## GUEST EDITORIAL:

## ANTHROPOLOGY AND IMAGINATION

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The concept of imagination has come to play an increasingly important role in contemporary anthropological praxis.<sup>1</sup> 'At its core anthropology demands an imaginative leap by comparatively challenging the naturalness of one's own cultural world,' wrote Catherine Trundle in describing the theme of the 37th annual conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ASAA/NZ), hosted by Victoria University of Wellington's Cultural Anthropology Programme from 8–10 December 2012 in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand. 'But imagination also drives the transformation and reinvention of the discipline. Postcolonial and postmodern anthropologists, for example, sought to re-imagine anthropology, the politics of knowledge and the discipline's place in the world.' This project continues in the context of globalisation, and Arjun Appadurai (2000) has called on anthropology to reconfigure the research imaginary in order to capture emerging transnational flows and disjunctures. Recognising the role of imagination in both understanding and bringing about change, he argues, attends to 'a faculty that informs the daily lives of ordinary people in myriad ways: it allows people to consider migration, resist state violence, seek social redress, and design new forms of civic association and collaboration across national boundaries' (2000, 6). The concept of the Anthropocene (the hypothesis that a new geological era defined by evidence of anthropogenic global environmental change began with the Industrial Revolution) has also seen scholars reconsider the place of the non-human in the anthropological project. As Stuart McLean (2007, 5) points out, 'imagination has been added to the lexicon of the social sciences,' imagined communities, new social imaginaries, imaginary states, political imaginaries, the colonial imagination, and ethical, bioethical and moral imaginings are now familiar analytical terms.

Taking *Anthropology and Imagination* as its theme, the 2012 ASAA/NZ conference invited participants to explore the plethora of imaginative processes

that shape and emerge from the anthropological project. This Special Issue of *SITES* provides an overview of the ways in which conference participants interpreted and critically reflected upon how we as anthropologists imagine our objects of study, our research methodologies, and our discipline. In this introduction, I begin with a report that draws out common issues raised by many of the papers addressing these three areas. I should note that what follows is a retrospective summary of the conference that reflects my personal perspective and interests; it is not a formally agreed-upon conference committee report, nor does it encompass all of the papers presented at the conference. I then introduce the papers that make up this issue of *SITES*: four delivered at the conference (comprising the Special Issue), and one in the General Section. The four papers, together with this introductory report, provide a snapshot of the breadth of ways in which anthropologists engaged with the theme of *Anthropology and Imagination* at the 2012 conference.

One of the key themes emerging from this conference concerned how we as anthropologists imagine our objects of study. Much contemporary anthropological writing about imagination is informed by Charles Taylor's concept of the social imaginary, which he defines as 'the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations' (2002, 106). Our lived social reality is, of course, linked to place, space, and a host of 'others:' other humans, other forms of life, and nonliving things. Recent work by scholars such as Tsing (2011), Deleuze & Guattari (1987), Haraway (2003, 2008), Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2004), Kohn (2007) and Steffen, Crutzen & McNeill (2007) destabilise classic dichotomies between human and 'other' and offer new social imaginaries that focus on intersections, entanglements, assemblages, alignments and ruptures, replacing either/or with in-between.<sup>2</sup> A number of papers at the 2012 ASAA/NZ conference explored various ethical, political, contentious and creative relationships that emerge between people, places, and material objects, particularly in the context of climate change and international development. This theme was introduced in Elizabeth Povinelli's keynote address, *Geontologies: Indigenous Digital Archives and the Late Liberal Anthropocene*, which I briefly review next.

Povinelli, Franz Boas Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University in New York, is one of anthropology's most provocative thinkers. Her research has focused on developing a critical theory of late liberalism that engages with questions of power, governance, and inequality and moves toward an 'anthropology of the otherwise' (see Povinelli 2011a, 2012, 2014). Povinelli has

worked extensively with Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory of Australia for the past three decades and has written about issues of belonging and abandonment in contemporary settler societies (2002, 2011b). In this keynote<sup>3</sup> she drew on her experiences of trying to create a transmedia project with Indigenous colleagues and friends.<sup>4</sup> The project would create electronic media files containing place-based historical and cultural information, geotagged in such a way that they could be played on digital technologies as people moved through a rural coastal area of northwest Australia. As she spoke I could envision their project: tourists travelling with smartphones which, when proximate to a river or hill or estuary, could (for a small fee) be used to access local indigenous information about that place via GPS and a mobile app. A postcolonial digital archive would be created by the people whose knowledge it contained, the interactive digital nature of which would appeal to their children and could also be used to generate revenue and gain access to information economies. During her address, Povinelli invited us to consider gentologies – the inextricable connections between biography, geography and power formations (see Povinelli 2014; Coleman and Yusoff 2014) – which offer a new imaginary of the earth and how humans relate to it in the current context of the late liberal Anthropocene.<sup>5</sup>

Several participants foregrounded the interconnections between humans and objects and places in the material world, for example by discussing the materiality of international development practices (see Fountain, this issue) or showing how creative imaginative processes are embodied in people and places (see Bright, this issue). Others used climate change as a backdrop for exploring the entangled impacts upon human and nonhuman communities; for discussing the ethical imperative in imagining an anthropology responsive to both the human and the demands of ‘others;’ and for considering the role imagination plays in how people individually and collectively respond to changing relationships between humans and nonhumans, and a changing physical environment with its own biography and agency. The idea that imagination is embodied is not a new one: as McLean writes, imagination should be understood ‘as an active component of experience and perception, engaged in a constant interchange with the material textures of the existing world’ (2007, 6). Anthropologists engaging with this theme at the 2012 conference were, in my view, part of a more widespread (re)turn toward social imaginaries that decentre the human as our object of study to focus on in-betweenness, particularly relationships between humans and various ‘others.’

The 2012 conference theme attracted innovative papers on research methodologies – a staple at anthropology conferences – with participants attentive not

only to imagination as a category of analysis, but also to its role in ethnography and the research imaginary. Associate Professor Ruth Fitzgerald, Hayley Balthard, Rosie Broad and Associate Professor Mike Legge drew on ethnographic research with families who have d/Deaf members to argue that ethnographic studies of lived experience provide different ethical principles of genetic testing for heritable d/Deafness to those derived from some bioethicists' imaginations. Dr Eleanor Rimoldi used Lloyd Jones' novel *Mr Pip* as a vehicle to explore blurred boundaries between ethnography and fiction, particularly in the public imagination. In a thoughtful paper entitled *Kaupapa Pākehā? Overcoming 'paralysis' through engagement*, Rachael Fabish reflected on her efforts to develop an ethnographic methodology responsive to the concerns of Kaupapa Māori research in her doctoral research on the ways in which Māori and Pākehā activists work together across difference. Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins also drew on her doctoral research (on Morris dancing in Britain) to imagine a historical anthropology based on present-day fieldwork, arguing for a methodological shift to include embodied, experiential data in historical research. Dr Nathalia Brichet described how she used material objects to prompt people she met on the streets of London to consider and co-analyse the role of amulets in their lives.<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, doctoral candidate Ruth Gibbons discussed how she actively courted imagination in her research participants by encouraging them to depict their lifeworlds in digitally created images and collaborative films – which also require imagination on the part of the viewer – with the goal of creating representations of interior, embodied experiences of dyslexia. Dr Paul Wolfram's award-winning film *Stori Tumbuna: Ancestors' Tales* (2011) extended this theme by illustrating how we can utilise the imagination of our participants in creating visual ethnographies. These and other papers suggested that while ethnography plays a vital role in producing anthropological knowledge, ethnographic research is more than participant observation and can be imagined and practiced in a variety of ways. This is highlighted in the papers by Shore and Kawharu (this issue) and Steven (this issue) which, although not specifically on ethnography as a method, show how important the interview is to ethnographic research.

The third theme I want to reflect on concerns anthropology as a discipline. Both conference plenary sessions addressed the ways in which we might imagine the future of anthropology, from different perspectives. The first session, entitled *Anthropologies: Local and global; past, present and future*, sought to locate the anthropology of Aotearoa New Zealand in relation to other anthropologies in the world, the institutions in which anthropology is practiced, and the changing academic climate brought about by neoliberal policies. In introducing the plenary, Dr Graeme Macrae encouraged us to consider how

we could build a national network of anthropology in Aotearoa New Zealand that transcends institutional boundaries. Professor Cris Shore and Associate Professor Susanna Trnka shared findings from their research project on well-known anthropologists here in the ‘periphery’ (see Shore and Trnka 2013, reviewed by Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich later in this issue), highlighting the contributions to knowledge made by anthropologists working outside the Northern hemisphere. Professor Thomas Reuter, then Chair of the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA), addressed criticisms of the anthropological project in his talk and outlined steps we can take to realise the emancipatory potential of anthropology. I was inspired by his description of a new WCAA initiative, *Déjà Lu*<sup>7</sup> (‘Already Read’), a multilingual e-journal that disseminates anthropological knowledge by re-publishing (with permission) and translating articles into a variety of languages. Professor Susan Wright’s observations of globalisation and university reforms in Europe and the United Kingdom<sup>8</sup> gave us a bleak glimpse of our own antipodean institutional futures. Overall the plenary suggested that while there might be a distinctively ‘New Zealand’ way of imagining and practicing anthropology, it is always connected to contemporary historical transformations occurring within and beyond the discipline elsewhere.

The second plenary session, *Re-imagining indigenous anthropology: Māori and Pacific Islander Perspectives*, was one of the conference highlights. Organised by Te Roopuu Take Tikanga Tangata (the Māori and Pacific Social Anthropology Network), the plenary focused on the potential for indigenous knowledges and epistemologies within anthropology. The plenary abstract set the scene for a critical reflection on the history of anthropology in Oceania and the emergence of ‘indigenous anthropology’ and noted the small but growing number of Māori and Pasifika students returning to anthropology.<sup>9</sup> ‘A century after the leaders of the Young Māori Party first imagined an anthropology undertaken by the indigenous people of this country, and over a half-century since Māori and Pacific students first engaged with the discipline in our universities, it surely now is time to re-imagine the places of Māori and Pacific Islanders in both historical and contemporary sociocultural anthropology; to survey the actual and possible career and professional trajectories of Māori and Pasifika trained in the discipline; and to debate the still-open question of how indigenous knowledges and epistemologies might contribute to a critical anthropology in and of Aotearoa, Oceania, and the world at large’ (Te Roopuu Take Tikanga Tangata, July 2012). This plenary was immediately followed by a panel discussion of the same name, so here I reflect on points of commonality shared by speakers Professor Ngahuia Te Awakotuku, Dr Okusitio Mahina, Misatauveve Dr Melani Anae QSO, Dr Tom Ryan, Associate Professor Manuka

Henare, Dr Lily George, Dr Marama Muru-Lanning, Dr Des Kahotea, Vincent Malcolm-Buchanan and Te Kororia Netana.

Professor Ngahuia Te Awekotuku begin her opening address with the same lines I had chosen as an epigraph for the conference call for papers:

Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight... (Malinowski 1922 [1961]: 4)

She paused after reciting this quote – a classic in the anthropological imaginary – and slowly surveyed her audience from the darkened stage of the Gryphon Theatre. ‘We were that village,’ she continued, reframing the scenario from an indigenous perspective and going on to trace the whakapapa of indigenous anthropology in Aotearoa.<sup>10</sup> A number of the speakers reinforced how important it is to critically reflect on anthropology’s colonial past in order to bring about meaningful change within the discipline. Conflicting perspectives, epistemologies and responsibilities were other shared concerns, with speakers reflecting on what it means to be Māori or Pasifika and an anthropologist; how having one foot in each community can provide an advantage over other disciplines (in that they can do anthropology ‘at home’ on those traditionally considered exotic ‘others,’ as well as on the majority Pākehā population); various ways in which they are working to relocate and embed anthropology within Māori and Pasifika scholarship, both in and beyond the classroom; and what it means to negotiate identities as indigenous anthropologists within their iwi and academia. The overall thrust of these critical and reflexive sessions was that Māori and Pasifika anthropologists are back, they are here to stay, and they have an important role in shaping the future of anthropology in Aotearoa. This was well received by the audience and there was a distinctly optimistic tone to the discussion following the sessions. I was moved by the eloquent and heartfelt response Dame Joan Metge (a founding professor of anthropology at Victoria University of Wellington and a key figure in the development of contemporary anthropology in Aotearoa New Zealand) gave during this time. As one of the speakers expressed it, ‘real knowledge begins at the intersection of conflicting indigenous and Western anthropological perspectives,’ and by claiming anthropology in different and unsettling ways, Māori and Pasifika anthropologists offer new and alternate ways of imagining anthropology as a discipline, our objects of study, and research relationships.

The four papers in this Special Issue approach the concept of imagination in a

variety of ways and ethnographic settings that range from Aotearoa New Zealand to Australia, Indonesia, and the United States. Cris Shore and Margaret Kawharu's paper engages imagination as a social and cultural analytic to explore how the concept of 'the Crown' is understood and contested in Aotearoa New Zealand. Drawing on Michael Walzer's idea that political and social institutions need to be imagined and symbolically constructed before they can become part of lived social reality, they unpack overlapping discourses embedded within the Crown to illustrate the malleable and contradictory ways in which political power and state authority, as embodied by this concept, are perceived. In this pilot study Shore and Kawharu are particularly concerned with exploring how people well-versed in Crown policies and practices – high court judges, legal experts, senior politicians, academics, Treaty of Waitangi claim negotiators, both Māori and non-Māori – imagine and engage with the Crown. They argue that because perceptions of the Crown shift according to context, it is more analytically productive to examine the symbolic and discursive work it performs in maintaining New Zealand's political and constitutional order rather than regard it as a stable ontological entity.

Philip Fountain is also concerned with shifting meanings. His paper explores a particular development thing – canned meat as produced by the Mennonite Central Committee, a North American Christian NGO – and the various meanings it embodies on contentious journeys through different countries and theological contexts. Material objects, Fountain argues, have often been sidelined in development scholarship in favour of analyses of culture, discourses, and power relations. In this paper he shows how focusing on the 'theological life of things' opens up new and productive lines of inquiry in the emerging field of 'religion and development.' As Fountain discusses, canned meat has a complex relationship with members of the Mennonite Central Committee who, as they communally work to make the meat, the label, and envision the cans' imagined endpoints, endow it with theological meaning. He analyses how this theological meaning is received, negotiated and contested as the cans move from the United States into Iraq and Indonesia through various distribution routes, themselves informed by ideologies of development. Fountain's 'biography of canned meat' illustrates how material objects act as collective imaginary that indicates how communities in different political and religious contexts perceive themselves and their relation to other people, places and things.

Dionne Steven's paper provides an ethnographic account of the 'weddings' of 30 same-sex couples who chose to formalise their relationships with civil unions in Aotearoa New Zealand. She argues that civil union ceremonies are reflexive cultural performances, informed by particular historical sociocultural

circumstances, that (to paraphrase Clifford Geertz) allow couples to tell stories about themselves to themselves and others. Following Victor Turner, she conceptualises same-sex civil unions as ritual, a particular genre of cultural performance that represents a transformation in social status. Steven analyses common themes arising from her participants' biographical narratives of how they constructed their ceremonies: narratives about negotiating proximity to, or distance from, 'traditional' heterosexual weddings; guest list narratives and what these suggest about relationships with family; narratives of lifestyle representation, or how to create personalised rituals; and narratives of the experience itself and its significance. As she points out, in less than 20 years New Zealand society has undergone a major shift from criminalising male homosexual activities to legally sanctioning same-sex relationships. Her paper shows how imagination, reflexivity and memory all play a role in creating cultural performances that represent personal and political transformations in social status.

In the fourth paper of this Special Issue, Angel Bright is attentive to how imagination and creative practices have 'offered both a means of engaging with a rapidly changing reality and a basis for understanding the ways in which people whose lives are caught up in contemporary historical transformations themselves seek to make sense of their altered circumstances' (McLean 2007, 6). Bright takes an ethnographic approach to issues of cultural survival and urban indigeneity in the context of Indigenous Aboriginal performances in Australia, exploring the role of imagination and creativity in a particular cultural performance: the Woggan-ma-gule Morning Ceremony, held on Australia Day in Sydney, New South Wales. In discussing how urban Indigenous Australians have been denied access to much of their cultural knowledge due to processes of colonisation, she shows how Aboriginal performance practices are firmly grounded in local places and formed in response to such wider historical processes. To support her argument that performance is a tool for cultural survival, Bright discusses how the performers use Woggan-ma-gule to achieve wider goals beyond commemorating Australia Day, including cultivating Aboriginal performance practices and identities within urban Indigenous communities; challenging negative stereotypes of Aboriginality; and creating and sharing cultural knowledge with members of the wider community. She also shows how the performance itself, which includes question and answer time, creates a relational space for imaginative interactions between performers and audience.

The General Section of this issue of *SITES* features a paper by Tim McCrea-nor, Jenny Rankine, Angela Moewaka Barnes, Belinda Borell, Ray Nairn and Anna-Lyse McManus examining the social impacts of a practice common to

print media in Aotearoa New Zealand, which is the association of Māori with crime stories. Their aim is to show how hegemonic racism in print media has the negative effect of destabilising wider social relations within Aotearoa New Zealand, arguing that the ‘endless parade of mundane, ‘below the radar’ stories about ethnically-labelled crime in our newspapers is an easily overlooked but crucial component in the maintenance of negative societal stereotypes and discourses about Māori people and communities.’ McCreanor *et al* combine content, thematic and discursive analysis of newspaper articles with focus groups to assess how Māori are portrayed and to gauge how media audiences make meaning of such media representations. They found that newspaper coverage of crime frequently depicted Māori as perpetrators of crime, deviant, threatening to non-Māori, and in need of control – markedly different to coverage of Pākehā perpetrators. The focus groups highlighted the powerful role media can have in constructing social reality, with Māori and non-Māori participants discussing how such news items result in actual experiences of discrimination and marginalisation.

The four papers in this Special Issue suggest that imagination is a creative activity that pervades cultural life. Taken with my conference report, I hope they invite readers to consider the role imagination plays in the research imaginary, in ethnographic practice, and in shaping the future of anthropology in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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#### NOTES

- 1 See McLean (2007) for a useful overview of the various ways in which anthropologists have engaged with the concept of imagination. John Cocking (1991) and Richard Kearney (1998) provide historical accounts of philosophical and religious thought on the concept of imagination, and more recently Kearney has engaged with European theories of imagination (1998).
- 2 Crapanzano (2004) and Massumi (2002) also discuss the importance of ‘between-ness.’
- 3 Povinelli delivered a similar keynote at The Anthropocene Project: An Opening, hosted by the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin on 11 January 2013. Her

talk, entitled 'Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism' has been published by the HwK Anthropocene Project on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6TLlgTg3LQ>

- 4 For more information about this project, visit the Karrabing Indigenous Corporation website: <http://www.karrabing.org/>
- 5 See Povinelli 2011c for a discussion of competing geontologies arising from the project.
- 6 Dr Brichet's short ethnographic documentary, 'Charmed Life in Contemporary London,' is available at <http://www.wellcomecollection.org/whats-on/exhibitions/charmed-life/charmed-life-in-london.aspx>
- 7 See <http://www.wcaanet.org/dejalu/index.html>
- 8 Prof Wright has published extensively on university reform and the anthropology of education, organisation, policy and governance. She is currently working on three international research projects related to universities in the global knowledge economy; see <http://pure.au.dk/portal/en/persons/susan-wright%28dac60d3f-f220-4991-bde2-4b7bc84e8362%29/projects.html>
- 9 See Henare (2007) for a discussion of how changes within and beyond anthropology shaped Maori scholarly participation in the discipline.
- 10 Metge, Sissons and George (2013) also offer a whakapapa of anthropology in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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