

# **SYDNEY ANTHROPOLOGY SYMPOSIUM SERIES (SASS)**

**ISSN 2201-4578**

**VOL 1**

**Online proceedings of the symposium  
*Anthropology and the Ends of Worlds*  
*edited by Sebastian Job, Linda Connor***

**Department of Anthropology  
University of Sydney 2010**

Impressum:

Title: Online Proceedings of the Symposium *Anthropology and the Ends of Worlds*. University of Sydney 25-26 March 2010

Editors: Sebastian Job, Linda Connor

Volume 1 in the Sydney Anthropology Symposium Series (SASS) Vol 1.

ISSN: 2201-4578

Series editor: Department of Anthropology. The University of Sydney 2010

Graphic: Katarina Ferro

***Papers from this online publication can be cited as:***

*[Author] 2010 [title] In: Online proceedings of the symposium 'Anthropology and the Ends of Worlds', edited by Sebastian Job and Linda Connor. Sydney Anthropology Symposium Series Vol 1. Sydney: University of Sydney 25-26 March 2010. <http://anthroendsofworlds.wordpress.com>*

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>Panel 1:</b> <b>Wanting and Denying the End</b> (Fri 26/03/2010; 9.30-11.00am)	
‘Crisis is Coming’ Visions of material and immaterial ends <i>Erin Taylor</i>	3
Climate Change and the Challenge of Immortality: Faith, denial and intimations of eternity. <i>Linda Connor</i>	16
<b>Panel 2:</b> <b>Prophecy and Eschatology</b> (Fri 26/03/2010; 9.30-11.00am)	
Spiritual Imagination and Societal Change in Indonesia: The Prophecies of King Jayabaya <i>Thomas Reuter</i>	34
The End of the World at the End of the Earth: Retrospective eschatology on Rapanui (Easter Island) <i>Grant MacCall</i>	45
<b>Panel 3:</b> <b>Accepting Death</b> (Fri 26/03/2010; 11.30-1.00pm)	
Death and the City: Mortuary Rituals and Urban Renewal in Surabaya. <i>Robbie Peters</i>	54
<b>Panel 4:</b> <b>The Future of Myth</b> (Fri 26/03/2010; 11.30-1.00pm)	
Technology, Disorder and the Ends of Work <i>Jon Marshall</i>	68
Without Ends Facing the End: of Aztec Revivalists and Anthropologists <i>Sebastian Job</i>	85

**Panel 5:**

**Aboriginal Ends** (Fri 26/03/2010; 2.30-3.00pm)

Perpetual Ends and Perpetual Beginnings: Temporalities of Indigeneity in Australia 96  
*Emma Kowal*

Death as the end of a future 110  
*Gaynor Macdonald*

**Panel 6:**

**Perilous Indigeneity in South America** (Fri 26/03/2010; 2.30-3.00pm)

'Anthropokaluptein': The End as Anthropological Revelation 124  
*Carla Stang*

**Appendix:**

Symposium Welcome Message

Contributor biographies

Time Schedule

132

# Introduction

Welcome to the online conference proceedings of the Symposium, 'Anthropology and the Ends of Worlds', hosted by the University of Sydney Department of Anthropology, 25th-26th March 2010. All the papers published here were originally presented at the Symposium and have been anonymously peer reviewed and revised by the authors. In keeping with their exploratory nature, they preserve something of their original character as oral presentations. Our heartfelt thanks to the authors and reviewers for the seriousness and rigour of their work, and to the many staff and student volunteers who contributed to making the Symposium a genuinely worthwhile event.

How should anthropologists think about the ends of worlds? Could this be merely one theme among others? Or does it place us in the most difficult situation, as thinkers and as people? As thinkers, because this situation also entails us as people? It seems in retrospect that the 'situation' was already there. That it has been unfolding itself and enfolding us for quite a while, whether we cared to address it directly or not. Indeed, the problem of endings has long afflicted some peoples much more than others. Often professionally occupied with western history's losers, anthropologists have been forced to grapple with what exactly ends when 'The End' looms up before a people or a culture, a language an era or a civilization. Yet whatever looms now looms not only for the cultural others, the dominated and outmatched, the small peoples whose plight takes place elsewhere. Nor are we faced with a mere prolongation of the self-cannibalisation and ecocide correctly diagnosed as inherent to modern capitalist society by conservative and radical critics at least since Burke, Marx and Engels. Something qualitatively larger is in the offing. Ours is a time in which yesterday's extravagant imaginings about threats to quality of life regularly appear modest in the light of today's relentlessly mounting evidence of new losses of species and habitat, on the accumulation of pollutants in soil and sea, on food shortages, energy crises, hyper-consumption, weapons sales, pandemics, population growth, inequality and urbanization. Over and over again, pessimistic calculations from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change prove, on re-examination, to be too optimistic. So the urgent word goes out: 'Do something!' But little is done. Climatologists issue deadlines for reducing greenhouse gas emissions on pain of large-scale destruction, while the really 'inconvenient truth' is that the deadlines will not be met and immense pain is being stored up. To speak of 'paranoid reactions' in these circumstances is correct and hardly unexpected. We can see them in many areas and they form part of the phenomenon that must be understood. Yet with equal justice we might heed the reply: 'Just because I'm paranoid doesn't mean the end is not coming!'

We are all of us, to be sure, in an increasingly intractable predicament. It is a cultural and existential predicament as much as a technological or political one. Its causes and dynamics, its local forms and contraflows will be understood by social scientists or they will not be understood at all. The papers here collected represent an initial, very modest, attempt to build on anthropological understandings of life worlds encountering irreversible transformation. Each tackles a specific domain while also, in different ways, wrestling with what is involved in reflecting upon that domain. Attempting to enter into the experiences of situated peoples themselves, these are papers, which approach the broad and polyvalent topic of the ends of worlds from diverse perspectives. Michael Taussig's keynote address poses the question, 'How will the human body reconnect with the body of the world?', invoking the mythic and poetic resources that

might make this possible. The performance piece by John von Sturmer and Slawek Janicki have made these resources forcefully present, inspired by the 'public performance of rage' by Wik at Aurukun in Northwest Queensland. These ideas are embraced in various ways by the papers published here. Carla Stang's paper focuses on threats to the invisible archetypal presences that constitute the Mehinaku worlds, and the wider implications of taking this knowledge seriously. The contradictory and disrupting temporalities of Aboriginal Australia are explored by Emma Kowal and Gaynor Macdonald, the former dwelling on the settler-colonial imaginary of tradition, death and modernity, and the latter examining the end of cultural meaning when descendants die before their elders. Gillian Cowlshaw, in an orally presented paper, challenges us to think about the demise of Indigenous cultures as a 'necessary phenomenon', an escape from politically enforced post-colonial resuscitations. Jon Marshall and Linda Connor illuminate 'end questions' of the myths surrounding modern technology, and cultural imaginings of immortality, and the chimeras of consumer capitalism in the face of planetary heat death. Sebastian Job, like Carla Stang, challenges us to take seriously the strivings of cultural others (in this case the neo-Aztec Los Concheros cosmogenic dancers in Mexico City) to diagnose and heal planetary malaise. Grant McCall explores Polynesian myths of original mana protection then loss, leading to cultural dissolution and death. Thomas Reuter develops a critique of modernist rationality, based on Javanese mystical traditions of prophecy and the encounter with truth beyond linear time. In her oral presentation, Veronica Quinteros discusses the early Polish proto-ethnographer Ignacio Domeyko's writings on the Mapuche of Chile, reflecting on the personal and historical reverberations of this encounter between a famously proud and intransigent people refusing colonisation and an exiled European grieving for his beloved Poland.

The materiality and immateriality of ends is the subject of Erin Taylor's paper, based on her research in a Santo Domingo barrio – a place where ends brought about by economic crisis and the second coming of Christ intersect and interweave in the visioning of new worlds in mundane and otherworldly planes. Similarly, Robbie Peters discusses the realities of poor city dwellers in Surabaya, where the destruction of social worlds culminates in the disruption to the ritual commemoration of death by a municipal government intent on the redundancy and simulation of urban renewal.

The papers published here represent a foray into issues whose national and international significance hardly needs stressing. These anthropological perspectives challenge dubious generalizations based on familiar but parochial perceptions and experience. With any luck the social and human sciences will not wait too much longer before giving priority to the problems of the fragile future of our planet and the deep interdependence of all its life forms and life worlds.

*Sebastian Job and Linda Connor*

# ***Panel 1***

## ***Wanting and Denying the End***

*(Fri 26/03/2010; 9.30-11.00am)*

### **¡Crisis is Coming! Material Manifestations of Immaterial Ends**

***Erin B. Taylor  
University of Sydney***

#### ***Abstract***

This paper explores how residents of a Santo Domingo barrio dream of, plan, and work towards the transformation or demise of their community. I argue that while conditions within the barrio itself may seem reason enough for this lack of hope, residents' yearnings for the end of their community primarily emerge from a much broader (and historically deeper) sense of crisis that relates government corruption to the moral degradation of Dominican society by way of explaining the failure of national aspirations for *progreso* (progress). Religion figures prominently in residents' visions of the future, underscoring two dominant visions for the barrio. The first proposes the end of the *local* material world through transforming the barrio an ideal modern community through widening streets, demolishing shacks, and creating parks. The second vision concerns the end of the *entire* material world through the second coming of Christ. This vision is shared among the almost universally Christian community, but it is particularly the domain of the Pentecostal churches. The two main groups who espouse these visions share the contradiction that the majority of their efforts go into constructing place when they aspire to be elsewhere. In the process of meeting basic needs, residents embed their lives, their hopes, and their sense of crisis within the material environment of the barrio. In this paper I will focus on these material manifestations to discuss their implications for life in a very poor community while its residents wait for, work towards, or give up on, different ends.

**Keywords:** Dominican Republic, urban anthropology, development, crisis, material culture, religion.

## **Introduction**

In Santo Domingo's barrios, religion plays an important role in structuring people's sense of morality in relation to the contradictions of their material environment. Despite the fact that their residence is often highly stable and predictable, residents' sense of constant crisis is embedded in their community in such a way that they find it difficult to imagine any future for the barrio. While they invest a great deal of time into constructing their houses and transforming the barrio into a liveable space, few residents believe that the barrio can ever transform to meet Dominican standards of what an ideal urban community should be. I argue that while conditions within the barrio itself may seem reason enough for this lack of hope, residents' yearnings for the end of their community primarily emerge from a much broader (and historically deeper) sense of crisis that relates government corruption with the moral degradation of Dominican society by way of explaining the failure of national aspirations for *progreso* (progress).

Religion figures prominently in residents' visions of the future, firstly because of the Catholic Church's longstanding role as a provider of welfare, and secondly because of the attraction that religion (especially Pentecostalism) holds for people whose options are limited. According to my household survey, around 63 percent of residents are Catholic (around 12,000 people), 14 percent are Pentecostal (around 2500 people) and roughly 8 percent belong to minor denominations. Almost 14 per cent reported no religion. About 20 percent of surveyed residents attended church at least twice a week.

Religion underscores two dominant visions for the barrio. The first proposes the end of the local material world through transforming the barrio an ideal modern community through widening streets, demolishing shacks, and creating parks. This redevelopment plan would require the relocation of large numbers of residents, and the relocation is supported by the Catholic Church and its congregation. The Church posits a return back to a former definition of modernity that centred upon the house and family. It does not entail the abandonment of consumption, but rather a reformation of values according with social imaginaries of an idyllic past.

The second vision concerns the end of the entire material world through the second coming of Christ. This vision is shared among the almost-universally Christian community, but it is particularly the domain of the Pentecostal churches. Practitioners are highly visible in the community due to their evangelising: the barrio is covered with spray-painted slogans such as *¡Cristo viene, prepárate!* (Christ is coming, prepare yourself!), and *evangelicos* (evangelists) use trucks, microphones and loudspeakers to deliver their message throughout the community at dawn and in public *cultos* (sermons). They preach that there is no worldly solution to the unfolding crisis.

The two main groups, who espouse these visions share the contradiction that the majority of their efforts go into constructing place when they aspire to be elsewhere. In the process of meeting basic needs, residents embed their lives, their hopes, and their sense of crisis within the material environment of the barrio. In this paper I will focus on these material manifestations to discuss their implications for life in a very poor community while its residents wait for, work towards, or give up on, different ends.



My thinking about religion in relation materiality is influenced by Daniel Miller's observations (1987, 2001) that separating subjective meanings from objects may be analytically useful but it ultimately misunderstands how people live in the world. Rather than engaging in a debate about what is material and what is not, I look at the material for what it can tell us about how people create meanings, make moral judgements, communicate viewpoints, and generate experiences. Fredric Jameson's (2005) comment that our imaginations of utopia are limited by our senses is particularly pertinent in demonstrating the materiality of our visions, regardless of whether they are geared towards the material world or the afterlife. He describes how our connection to the material world through touching, feeling, seeing, tasting, and smelling defines our transcendental experiences. Hence it is through the material world that we communicate our beliefs, structure our practices, and experience transcendence. There is, then, no immateriality at all apart from what we imagine through the material. I adopt this standpoint to draw attention to how, in Santo Domingo's barrios, efforts to transcend a perpetual sense of crisis are not 'escapist', but rather draw upon the very same material fabric of life from which crisis emerges. Examining this material basis can illuminate how and why people may or may not hold hope in material solutions to the poverty and insecurity of barrio life.

## ***Local transformations***

The Dominican Republic is a former Spanish colony that occupies the eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola (of which the remainder is occupied by Haiti). Its capital city, Santo Domingo, is located 1330 kilometres from Miami. The United States receives approximately 60percent of Dominican exports, and remittances make up about 10percent of the GDP (CIA World Factbook). In Santo Domingo's barrios, most residents make a living as domestic servants or construction workers. Apart from small amounts of funds sent from relatives abroad, most of their experience of the economy is profoundly local. Indeed, my observations suggest that a great deal of their income gets spent within the barrio itself, where a profusion of grocery stores, bars, betting agencies, and home businesses compete for the attention of residents.

The barrio of La Ciénaga began to be populated in the 1960s. It is close to the city centre but it is one of the city's most underdeveloped barrios. Turning into the *avenida de la marina* via the sole entrance *abajo el puente* (local rendering of 'under the bridge'), there is a pretty street lined with newly planted trees, the wide river running alongside to the right, barricaded off by brightly coloured railings. The visitor passes the neat fire station, the military post and the salami factory, a basketball court and numerous people buying street food and hanging out to the sounds of *bachata* (a Dominican style of music) and motorbikes passing. This is considered the nicest part of the barrio, the public face where motorists passing by the entrance can admire the "progress" that is seeping into the squatter settlements from the city.

After the salami factory, the street diverges and narrows. No longer are there newly laid pavements to walk on or places to sit, and if you duck into an alleyway, you end up meandering through the alleyways of *abajo* (below, meaning the lower swampy ground in the barrio) where houses are pressed close together and street vendors' carts can barely pass, let alone a fire truck to put out a fire. Soon the concrete paved parts run out and you are clambering over rocks and planks to bypass the large dirty puddles left by the

summer rain and pass over canals full of *agua negra*, water so black that it looks like came straight out of an oil well, emitting something akin to Engels' miasmatic gas in the canals of nineteenth century Manchester. Kids play in houses that have half sunk into the swamp since their owners converted them from shacks to concrete block, making them too heavy to withstand the pull of the mud. This is La Ciénaga, The Swamp, still indicative of its name after years of filling in the land with rubbish and digging networks of drains.

When I lived in La Ciénaga in 2005, the barrio was much worse than it is now. Tropical storm Alpha trapped many of us in for a few days as Calle Nueve flooded impassably. Since Leonel Fernández won his first term as President in 1996, the federal government, together with the European Union and local organizations, have invested money in projects to make the area safer and provide more extensive and frequent services. These have included installing telephone lines, paving streets and alleyways, improving housing, installing indoor lavatories, building the school, and improving access to electricity. Large stormwater drains have now been installed, solving the flooding problem for much of the barrio. A large playground and park now exists where there used to be a permanent rubbish heap. And most importantly, according to residents who answered my latest survey in November 2009<sup>1</sup>, most of the alleyways *abajo* have been paved. Here, concrete is the saviour; it improves drainage, banishes mud, and provides a place for kids to play. It is what houses are ideally made of when owners can scrape together enough money to start buying concrete blocks and cement. Indeed, the expanding presence of concrete in the barrio, in the form of paving and *casas buenas* (good houses) is the primary indicator of progress here in La Ciénaga, both for residents and outsiders who can view the barrio as they cross the bridge spanning the Ozama River. Not everyone in the barrio has benefitted equally from these improvements, and La Ciénaga continues to be perceived as an underdeveloped and dangerous place by both residents of the barrio and throughout Santo Domingo. Many of the barriers faced by residents are still in place, such as lack of land title, discrimination in the work force, limited access to education, unsatisfactory sanitation and denial of citizenship rights.

The state's improvements to the barrio are significant but they come late in the piece. For the vast majority of the barrio's existence, the Jesuit priests and nuns of the Catholic church have provided the main institutional support for the barrio, often conflicting with state attempts to disband the community, such as during state evictions in 1977 and 1991 (Taylor 2009a), and protests against the construction of a sewerage treatment plant in the mid-1990s (Taylor 2009b). When the barrio first began to be settled in the late 1960s, the earliest forms of social organization in the barrio were based around family arrangements, especially the proximity of residence of other family members such as children, parents, cousins, uncles, and so on. These were very closely followed, in the early 1970s, by the formation of a religious community by a local priest who animated the community to attend church in a neighbouring barrio and hold their own prayer meetings in La Ciénaga. Over the next few decades, the Jesuit priests and the nuns who ran the local school provided an important source of psychological support to residents and were the primary motivators of material transformation:

---

<sup>1</sup> I have carried out two surveys, mostly qualitative, in La Ciénaga. The first, in August 2005, consisted of 48 questions and was answered by 50 people in each of the barrio's six sectors. The second, in November 2009, consisted of 58 questions and was answered by 40 people in each of the barrio's six. The questions primarily concerned demographic information, migration and family dispersion, people's opinions of the barrio and its organisations, and views on Dominican society and politics.

“We did so much work to *levantar* (raise up) this community, we walked around this entire gully of Maria Auxiliadora, we were *chancleteando* (walking in sandals) down the alleys carrying the word of God to all parts, evangelizing the word of God. It was a lot of work to form the community, and to get it like it is today I spent thirty-four years. I am one of the old women and those that haven’t moved away have died, but I’m always here thanks to God. God has me here because he needs me here. Many people were evicted but not me.

I believe that the community has advanced a lot in this barrio, because this was mud, lots of mud and water. Here below you couldn’t go anywhere because of the water... The community has helped the barrio *subir* (rise), given it strength, like the reign of God has grown because before the people didn’t want to go to the reunions and now they come to Mass. Many women have died, now there are few of us who remain.” (Felicia)

For Felicia, the spiritual and the material development of the community are two sides of the same coin. Without God, nothing can be achieved because only God can give residents the strength to work hard for their community’s future. Felicia’s approach is not surprising given the absence of other organisations in the community, or indeed any support from the outside. In the early days of the community, the Catholic Church was the only point of meaningful institutional contact for many residents, and it remains the most influential organisation in the barrio.

However, it is not residents’ piety but the material transformation of the barrio that has altered the way in which residents are valued (Taylor 2009b). Visible material improvements, easily noted from the bridge, indicate to outsiders that La Ciénaga is indeed transforming slowly but surely from the swamp it is named after to a barrio that is fit for human habitation, though it still falls far short of meeting the standards of an ideal urban community. The dominant political strategy in the barrio has been to resignify the barrio, and revalue residents, in accordance with normative notions of what it means to be legitimate urban dwellers and Dominican citizen. The Catholic Church has played a dual role in mobilizing material transformation and providing moral legitimacy for this project. As Samuel, a participant in my study, explained to me:

“The church, particularly the Catholic Church, we know it has a lot of power. When the Catholic Church pronounces that it is in favour of or against something, generally the government pays attention because although it represents a great power, the Catholic Church has a universal power”. (Samuel)

While the Catholic Church has been a powerful force in the Dominican Republic since colonization in 1492, it has only begun to be directly involved in development since the 1960s. The Trujillo dictatorship that reigned from 1930 to 1961 depended upon church support and use of religious symbolism to legitimate his regime, permitting the Catholic Church to pursue its ecclesiastical activities so long as they did not interfere in the state’s economic and ideological programs (Betances 2007; Derby 2009). Whereas during authoritarian rule any conflict of interest between the state and church was muted, today the Catholic Church’s ideological and material projects frequently diverge from those of the state (Sáez 2007)<sup>2</sup>. The

---

<sup>2</sup> Marianna Valverde (1994) uses the term ‘moral capital’ to draw attention to the ‘relative independence’ with which moral beliefs operate in relation to economic and social capital, thereby amending Bourdieu’s forms of capital and arguing against Marx’s subordination of the moral and social to the economic. Morality, then, is not a means to an economic end, but an end in itself.

church continues to assist the state in governing and producing subjects, but it also suggests alternatives to national culture and socio-economic structure. During the political turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s, the Catholic Church reframed its politics around ideas of liberal democracy and social change. It took on a central role as mediator of political disputes such as accusations of electoral fraud. It presented itself as a leader in the transition from authoritarian rule to liberal democracy, advising on legislation, founding civil organizations, and campaigning for services and development in poor communities.

The Jesuits run various programs including mother-infant support groups, fathers groups, youth groups, and a Haitian choir. They lecture against racism and discourage parents from buying toy guns for their children. In short, they integrate material and spiritual concerns in their work in the barrios. Their sermons explicitly link crises in the barrio with national crises and global issues, telling the congregation that 'poverty is not the fruit of God'. They preach that we have been living in the end of times since Christ was born, and it is our responsibility to live well with each other to meet the apocalypse. Thus the political project of transforming the barrio has an immaterial end. A brand new church opened in November 2009. Although it is a simple structure, it is large and sparking new, so in the environment of La Ciénaga it looks somewhat out of place. Residents commented to me that it belongs to an *otra clase*, another social class, and the attraction of this new, modern, comfortable structure has resulted in a significant increase in attendance, from about 300 people at a Sunday morning mass to about 500 people.

The Catholic Church's significant breadth of influence in the Dominican Republic renders it an influential force. Its embeddedness in local communities, strong state relations, and status as a global institution give it an advantage over other political and economic organizations. Depending upon local context, the church may work directly in poor communities to provide services (such as education, health and political training); campaign for the state to install services and make legislative changes, or help poor communities to seek resources from other sources, such as international NGOs (see Levine 1992; Shepherd 1993). While the church works with the state on many occasions to coordinate its social programs, in other instances it bypasses the state altogether in favour of working directly with communities or with international organizations.

The Jesuits, through their research and teaching organisation Centro Bonó, founded the Coordinación para el Desarrollo de La Ciénaga (CODECI) in September 1998, after Hurricane George devastated the community. CODECI is an umbrella organisation that coordinates all grassroots organisations within La Ciénaga. CODECI's purpose is to coordinate community development between the barrio's political, religious and social groups, and to liaise with government and non-government organisations. These local organisations include sporting groups, an association of professionals and a home owners' association. Most concentrate their activities on developing the barrio and raising its public profile. CODECI's activities centre on lobbying

---

She cites Bourdieu's work on distinction as an example of how the goal of the accumulation of goods is to create the cultured self. In a similar vein, I argue that the use of moral capital by barrio residents is both strategic and meaningful.

For an account of these divergences and continuing relations between church and state in Latin America, see Gill (1998).

for the installation of urban services such as drainage, sewerage treatment, electricity and water, to bring La Ciénaga into line with the rest of the city.

CODECI worked with the Santo Domingo organisation Ciudad Alternativa (Alternative City, founded in 1989) on the development of a plan to redevelop La Ciénaga and the neighbouring suburb of Los Guandules. Plan Cigua (Navarro 2004) is a detailed urban plan that provides for residents on the higher ground to remain in La Ciénaga and Guachupita, while relocating families residing in dangerous parts of the barrio such as the riverbank, low-lying areas prone to flooding, and the cliffs, which regularly experience landslides. This plan does not appear to be particularly divisive in La Ciénaga, yet neither are many residents actively involved in pushing them forward. The reasons for this are various and little consensus appears to exist on why this is so. For one community leader I spoke with, the barrio is redeemable, but many residents lack the intelligence necessary to understand the problems that the barrio faces:

“I think that for the future – this is speculation, like dreaming – but I think that within a short time it will be necessary to evict the people who live in the uninhabitable zone at the edge of the Ozama River. They live in extreme danger. We understand, although one can’t say it because if you say it to them, they don’t understand. Their abilities don’t permit them to understand that they live in danger. I believe that for the future we should evict this group of people who live so close to the river that their backyard is water. Here where we live, where you live, where I live in Clarín, I believe with time this could urbanize, and so that a large portion of La Ciénaga could live in this sector in high buildings.” (Joaquín)

This statement does not acknowledge that many residents live where they are because they have nowhere else to go. On the 28th August, 2008, eight people died in neighbouring Guachupita when a landslide caused by Tropical Storm Gustav buried their houses. The Catholic Church led a mass protest and the resulting media pressure caused the government to announce a program to relocate 150 families from the area to a new settlement near Herrera Airport. These families are now, at the time of writing (November 2010), finishing building their new houses and are awaiting relocation. But for now, they remain in Guachupita because they have nowhere else to go.

Converting the barrio into a ‘good’ suburb would require evicting many of its current residents to make space for the improvement of housing and the installation of services and facilities, such as parks, schools, and clinics. The small size of houses, their density, proximity to the street, lack of yards, and distribution along narrow alleyways would be replaced with planned suburbs with houses set back from the street. They know this from the past: in 1977 and 1991, state evictions of residents in La Ciénaga targeted people with the poorest housing, leaving residents with concrete houses on the wider streets alone. The minority of residents who have street frontage have witnessed the most improvements, as most residents’ houses line crowded alleyways and services were not always extended there. It therefore makes little sense for residents in poor housing to campaign for the development of the barrio. While they appreciate improvements such as concreting alleys and installing drainage, they are unlikely to be beneficiaries of any material transformations in the long term. Furthermore, many people simply find it difficult to believe that a barrio with so many – and such longstanding – problems can ever be transformed. The extent of poverty, perceptions of criminality, and stigma attached to the barrio appear inalienable from the space it occupies.



## ***The non-locality of crisis and aspirations***

This imaginary of inalienable hopelessness is not just based on barrio conditions. Rather, a sense of the failure of national progress, in the form of government corruption and the breakdown of Dominican society, does not exactly induce hope in residents that their efforts will bear fruit. Furthermore, it reflects the fact that most people's aspirations do not lie in the barrio at all. While people dream of converting their *ranchitos* (wood and tin houses) into concrete houses, and in fact put a great deal of effort into doing so, they overwhelmingly place hope that their children will be able to access good education, become professionals, and leave the barrio altogether. For the vast majority of residents, the way forward is not to make the barrio liveable, but to leave the barrio altogether for a better suburb elsewhere in the city, perhaps by educating a child to become a doctor or lawyer.

Despite significant material improvements in the barrio that have been widely applauded by residents, my survey also found that residents have less hope in the future than they had four years previously. When I conducted my first survey, Leonel Fernández had been in the second term of his presidency for less than a year. Confidence in his government was especially high because people were relieved to have left behind the disastrous presidency of Hipólito Mejía from 2000-2004. Fernández's focus on education and technology as the way for the nation to *echar pa'lante* (move forward) seemed like sound policy to squatter settlement residents who viewed (and continue to view) education as a primary route out of poverty. Today, however, in Fernández's second consecutive term, residents have lost that hope. They view corruption as continuing as it did before, renegeing on possibilities for a fair distribution of resources and opportunities. CODECI's program was virtually halted between 2000 and 2004 during the presidency of Hipólito Mejía of the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD). The Dominican economy took a drastic downturn in 2003, when fiscal mismanagement and the embezzlement of funds from the Central Bank caused the devaluation of the peso by 74 percent (ECLAC 2004). The period saw a rapid rise in inflation and therefore a serious decline in real wages (ECLAC 2004). Cienigüeros (residents of La Ciénaga) still talk about the steep rise in food prices and complain of government corruption during the four years of Mejía's presidency:

"Things are worse in this country because the international price of combustibles is high and we don't produce them. Also it is because the politicians believe that they buy the country for four years, that it belongs to them, and they take everything because for them there is no justice; they haven't been an example, and so they are going to continue like runaway horses, as they say, taking everything that passes through their hands. Here we have a serious situation, so calamitous that if fifty million pesos are allocated to fix a problem, forty-two million will disappear and they will invest the remaining eight million. This is very serious." (Carlos)

Corruption prevents a fair and equitable distribution of resources amongst the population. Despite the country's long history of poverty and economic turmoil, most Dominicans do not believe that poverty is necessary. Cienigüeros feel that their contribution to the nation's development is not duly rewarded. According to my surveys and interviews, they recognize the nation's precarious financial situation, while criticizing wasteful practices such as

corruption, clientelism, the concentration of wealth among a small population, foreign ownership, low taxes and extensive incentives to investors. The corruption of the wealthy and powerful has a direct effect on the moral well-being of the barrio, since it affects the ability of families to raise their children in a safe and secure environment:

“There are many lost young people and this hurts me because here there are many powerful people who could do something. There are children in the streets living below the bridge, in the parks, on the benches and here in the country there are many people who could make schools and collect these children and take them to school. The politicians are only interested in politics and making money for themselves; they don’t see what is happening in the streets, what is affecting us in the streets.

If you have a headache and you don’t go look for medicine you’re not going to get better. So if you come here and tell me ‘Oh, my head hurts’, then I’m going to say, ‘Well go look for a pill!’ So if I take a pill my headache goes. I had the intention to get rid of my headache. So, the politicians come here campaigning for us to vote for them. After they get into power, if each one built a little piece of street we would live in gold, because here in this country there is money. This is a millionaire country, but there are no good intentions. Here there are millions and millions in the banks but for the street nothing, you see the politicians going around in jeeps but they don’t help the barrios.” (Jorge)

Barrio residents tend not to think highly of their place of residence, but their sense of social corruption and moral failure stretches far beyond the barrios. It is part of a broad anxiety that the fabric of Dominican society is falling apart. According to popular discourse, all of a sudden in the last two decades, people steal from each other, neighbours don’t support each other (see Taylor 2009b). Parenting is failing as people have to leave their children while they work, and people are fixated upon consumer goods at the expense of social relations:

“The rich can pay for their children to go to a nursery, but us poor have to leave them alone in the house to look after themselves as well as they can. While we are in the street working, they are doing whatever they feel like because there are no adults watching them. This is why our society is so corrupt, with so much delinquency, so much crime and ugly things, the lack of care on the part of the parents.

I always say that us the parents are responsible for delinquency, because if your children aren’t watched they will follow the wrong path. I don’t blame them but rather us. This and globalization, because before we didn’t have televisions because we couldn’t buy them, but now every poor person has a 20-inch television in their house, a huge stereo, a VHS and a fridge, everything. Parents have left their children behind to go achieve what they want, what they wish, to scale the ladder. Before it was Father and Mother before everything. Material goods have diverted them from parenting.” (Bethania)

It is not uncommon to hear people say that thieves and drug dealers are primarily young men who have been deported from the US back to the Dominican Republic and imported the crafts they learned on the streets of Washington Heights and Miami. Hence the problem has sources on so many levels that it is impossible to see how progress can occur. The streets of La Ciénaga are paved, but nothing is going to change because the problem is so widespread. If there is any solution at all, it will involve craftsmanship and nurturing, rather than violence and struggle, to transcend the ‘violences of everyday life’ (Scheper-Hughes 1992) through a humanitarian and unified process of progress. This is why the church’s messages of peace

and harmony ring true to so many residents. Its combination of spiritual transcendence and political power provide a practical model for reconciling twin contradictions: one in which the self embodies both positive and negative values, and a second in which urban life brings both violence and progress. In the following statement, Felicia connects her idea of spiritual transcendence with her material conditions:

“At times one asks God for something but God says that if one asks him you have to wait for the reward, and if he doesn’t give it to you it’s because it doesn’t suit him. Every day you need to have more confidence in him because he is the only one that can help you in everything. If you are going to go out first you ask that everything will go well. You thank God for the bread that he has given you, for the water, the daily bread, also for the air, the nature and also I thank God for the name he has given me, also for the force he has put in me because it is him that gives me the strength I need. Because look at the time we are living in, with so much wickedness, so much selfishness, so much injustice, so many things that we need every day that hold us to God. He is the only one who can help us.” (Felicia)

The wickedness and injustice that Felicia identifies is not simply an abstract biblical wickedness (a characteristic of an unredeemed humanity), but rather it is very much part of the everyday milieu in which barrio residents live. The structural violence of urban poverty is unendurable without God, who provides a wealth of spirit that replaces and becomes superior to, material wealth. Transcendence balances the transience of barrio life in a dialectical fashion to create a synthesis in-between, which is the outcome of the structural position of people and the deployment of available strategies. This is the act of self-creation, the positioning of the self or group as a complete social being who embodies neither the rupture of an immoral soul divorced from God and society, nor the material want and despair that informs others’ readings of the barrio. Marcia, who spent a year studying as a novice in Santiago before returning to Santo Domingo to study law, commented of her fellow barrio residents:

“The poor are stronger believers. The poor look for a refuge in religion. It doesn’t matter which religion, but they look for a refuge. The rich aren’t like that. The rich look for refuge in their money, and at times, perhaps one day, they go to Mass. The poor no, as the poor don’t have any money so they look for something that fills them, and they put themselves in religion because they want to believe in something and the only manner to believe is to put yourself in a religion, whichever it is. There are many poor people who are rich in spirit, that’s what I’ve always said.” (Marcia)

Hence religion is not merely a matter of individual faith divorced from economy. While constructing the barrio and their housing has provided residents with a sense of achievement and community, religion helps residents cope with the moral side of the crisis, in terms of both their own stigmatization and their sense of a loss of morality nationwide. It plays a social role in bringing residents together, and it also has a transformative potential by providing an institutional platform through which residents can represent themselves to the outside world.

But what stands out is how this sense of overwhelming crisis, rendered in apocalyptic terms, is fuelled by rapid changes in Dominican society. Uurbanisation, political instability, and growth in crime since the 1960s, as well as increasing access to media such as television, have fuelled and deterritorialized Dominicans’ constant sense of crisis. Both the Catholic church and the Pentecostals preach that we are in ‘the end of times’, though their interpretation of this process differs strongly. For the Catholics, we have been living in ‘the end of times’ since the



birth of Jesus, and their high valuation on life directs believers' attention to the secular plane. The Pentecostals' activities, on the other hand, put much more emphasis on the afterlife, albeit in a way that is acutely presentist, and made so through the material. The barrio is decorated with graffiti and handpainted signs with declarations such as *¡Cristo viene, preparate!* (Christ is coming, prepare yourself!) or *Hoy yo sigo Cristo* (Today I follow Christ). Almost every morning, at dawn, the barrio is evangelized awake by a believer pronouncing the word of God with a loudspeaker (either on foot or in a truck). The sound of this daily ablution is very particular. Being lulled out of one's sleep by urgent proclamations of the end of the world has a bodily effect – physical as much as psychological – that tends to imprint itself on one's memory. Along with the roar of motorbikes, the sound of chatter, and the smell of coffee, it forms an experience of dawn that always reminds me where I am, whenever I am in the field. It is not possible to be in La Ciénaga and not know where you are.

Pentecostal sermons maximise this bodily effect through many means. Sound is also of crucial importance in their *cultos* (sermons) with the requisite sound system prevailing supreme as attendees sing animatedly to their enthusiastic audience. Coupled with glossolalia, *cultos* are very much a physical event. They are designed this way to draw attendees into the moment, and also to encourage the attention of neighbours on the street, to encourage them to come along. This is, in fact, a major drawcard: a number of Pentecostals explained to me that it was the music that inspired them to attend the church initially. The highly sensory nature of *cultos* reminds me of Fredric Jameson's (2005) comment that our imaginations of utopia are limited by our senses: our connection to the material world through touching, feeling, seeing, tasting, and smelling defines our transcendental experiences. Hence it is through the material world that we communicate our beliefs, structure our practices, and experience transcendence. There is, then, no immateriality at all apart from what we imagine through the material.

While poverty and consumption form part of crisis, the source of the problem is fundamentally a moral one. It cannot therefore be resolved through the redistribution of resources, the improvement of housing, or through access to mass produced goods. Rather than commodities and material world, people turn to religion as the staple of values and an already-existing utopia that does not have to be invented or struggled for except on a personal level. This does not mean that they do not share the material aspirations of other residents, or the desire to leave the barrio for a better neighbourhood; rather, the particular apocalypticism of the Pentecostals deprivileges the material as the source of crises or the means to resolve them. Pentecostals in La Ciénaga appear to reject what Jean and John Comaroff call 'millennial capitalism', 'a capitalism that presents itself as a gospel of salvation; a capitalism that, if rightly harnessed, is invested with the capacity wholly to transform the universe of the marginalized and disempowered' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:2).

In this they differ from manifestations of Pentecostalism that have emerged elsewhere in the region, such as Jamaica, where Pentecostalism offers a path not just to respectability but also material gain (see Austin-Brooks X). They also differ from Christian fundamentalism in the United States where, if poverty is not actually viewed as the 'fruit of God', wealth is cast as a reward for moral (church-going, tithe-giving) behaviour. More research needs to be done to determine whether this manifestation of Pentecostalism is peculiar to the particular conditions of the barrio, or if what Manuel Vásquez (1999) terms 'religious post-Fordism' has deposited many different interpretations of the moral world.

## **Conclusion**

The rejection of the possibility of material transformation, whether through old-fashioned class action or neoliberal salvation, has quite a different relationship to ideals and values than the material solutions I have outlined. Visions of achieving progreso within the material world require some degree of sacrifice of sociality in order to achieve an ideal life. Respectable personhood, which entails living in a 'good' house and community, brings about a certain degree of physical isolation from one's neighbours, thereby reducing the sociality that is so highly valued in Dominican culture. The end of the world, on the other hand, rejects the material in favour of maintaining the ideal of sociality, envisaged in this instance not as a practice throughout Dominican society but by humankind as a whole within the spiritual realm. Visions of a global humanity joined together by religion or by consumption appear irreconcilable. Yet the fact that the material is the medium for communication in both cases suggests that people do not see any contradiction in objectifying that which is meant to transcend. Hence, whether we are discussing the development of a poor barrio, or the psychological-institutional methods people use to cope with difficult lives, the material environment is good to think with.

## **References**

- Austin-Broos, D. J. 1997. *Jamaica Genesis: Religion and the Politics of Moral Orders*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Betances, E. 2007. *The Catholic Church and Power Politics in Latin America: The Dominican Case in Comparative Perspective*. Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Comaroff, J. and Comaroff, J. 2001. *Millennial Capitalism and the Cultures of Neoliberalism*. North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- Derby, L. 2009. *The Dictator's Seduction: Politics and the Popular Imagination in the Era of Trujillo*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Ferguson, J. 1993. Pain and Protest: The 1984 Anti-IMF Revolt in the Dominican Republic, in H. Beckles and V. A. Shepherd (eds.), *Caribbean Freedom: Economy and Society from Emancipation to the Present*, 566-74. Kingston, Jamaica: I. Randle Publishers; London: J. Curry Publishers.
- Gill, A.J. 1998. *Rendering Unto Caesar: The Catholic Church and the State in Latin America*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Gregory, S. 2007. *The Devil Behind the Mirror: Globalization and Politics in the Dominican Republic*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hoffnung-Garskof, J. 2008. *A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York After 1950*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

- Holston, J. 1991. Autoconstruction in Working-Class Brazil, *Cultural Anthropology*, 6(4): 447-65.
- Jameson, F. 2005. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London and New York: Verso.
- Kleinman, A. 2000. 'The Violences of Everyday Life: The Multiple Forms and Dynamics of Social Violence', in V. Das, A. Kleinman, M. Ramphele and P. Reynolds (eds.), *Violence and Subjectivity*, 226-41. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Krohn-Hansen, C. 2001. 'A Tomb for Columbus in Santo Domingo: Political Cosmology, Population and Racial Frontiers', *Social Anthropology*, Volume(2): 165-92.
- Levine, D. H. 1992. *Popular Voices in Latin American Catholicism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Martínez-Vergne, T. 2005. *Nation and Citizen in the Dominican Republic, 1880-1916*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Masco, Joseph. 2006. *The Nuclear Borderlands: The Manhattan Project in Post-Cold War New Mexico*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Miller, D. 1987. *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*. Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell.
- Miller, D. 2001. The Poverty of Morality. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 1(2):225-243.
- Navarro, A. 2004. '*Plan Cigua: Plan de desarrollo urbano para La Ciénaga y Los Guandules*', Santo Domingo: Ciudad Alternativa - CODECIGUA.
- Sáez, SJ J.L. 2007. *El Quehacer de la Iglesia Dominicana (1511-2006)*. Santo Domingo: Centro Fe y Cultura Roberto Bellamino.
- Santana, J. 2004. *Zona Norte: La Expulsión de los Excluidos*. Santo Domingo: Ciudad Alternativa.
- Scheper-Hughes, N. 1992. *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Shepherd, F.M. 1993. Church and State in Honduras and Nicaragua Prior to 1979, *Sociology of Religion*, 54(3):277-293.
- Taylor, E.B. 2010. A Reluctant Locality: The Politics of Place and Progress. In C. Trundle and B. Boenisch-Brednich (Eds.). *Making Locals: Migration and the Micropolitics of Place*. Surrey, UK: Ashgate.
- Taylor, E. B. 2009a. 'From el campo to el barrio: Memory and Social Imaginaries in Santo Domingo', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 16(2): 157-78.
- Taylor, E. B. 2009b. 'Poverty as Danger: Fear of Crime in Santo Domingo', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12(2): 35-52.
- Valverde, Marianna. 1994. Moral Capital. *CJLS/RCDS*, 9(1):213-232.
- Vásquez, M. 1999. Toward a New Agenda for the Study of Religion in the Americas. *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 41(4):1-20.

# Climate change and the challenge of immortality: Faith, denial and intimations of eternity

*Linda H. Connor  
University of Sydney*

## ***Abstract***

The relentlessly mounting science of climate change and global heating encourages thoughts of future humanity as “survivors of a failed civilization” (Lovelock, 2007, p. 202) if indeed there are survivors at all. The possible endings of the world as we know it are diverse, as are the technological fixes that might salvage and sustain life on the planet Earth or its alternatives. Theories of human-caused climate change have moved from heterodox to orthodox state-sponsored science in just a few years. However currents of scepticism and denial run vigorously against the scientific tide, strengthened by the global vested interests of carbon-intensive economic growth. Transnational environmental movements and concerted political commitment in many parts of the world have not achieved the necessary carbon reduction policies, as demonstrated by the failed UN-sponsored Copenhagen climate conference in December 2009. Streams of religionist doomsday movements gain volume and strength, prophesying Apocalyptic end times of a quite different order to planetary heating.

Climate change is a cultural crisis of life worlds that begs critical anthropological analysis. What are the cultural resources that human societies are bringing to bear on the problem of climate change? How do institutional religions and various forms of heterodox knowledge figure in the mobilization of action to protect the balance of nature, or accelerate its further disruption? How do forms of environmentalism articulate with religion-based heroic myths and immortality thinking in a world of secular politics and science where Earth, not Other/After Worlds, is the site of human self-perpetuation? How can anthropology enhance understanding of the cultural and psychological processes that sustain scepticism and denial of a heating, deteriorating world? This paper will explore these questions based on ethnographic research with religious adherents and other residents in an intensely carbonised region with high climate change vulnerability – the Hunter Valley of New South Wales.

**Keywords:** Climate change, scepticism, cultural crisis, immortality, death, religion, Hunter Valley, NSW

## **Introduction**

The growing body of anthropological work on the problem of climate change draws on ethnographic methods of research and a variety of theories, from the more interpretive (e.g. Macrae 2010; Milton 2008) to critical and structural approaches (e.g. Baer 2009). A recent edited book, *Anthropology and Climate Change*, incorporates insightful ethnographic case studies of climate-culture relationships, climate change in specific localities, and policy applications of anthropological knowledge (Crate and Nuttall 2009). In this paper, I focus on the way anthropology can analyse anthropogenic climate change (ACC) as a cultural crisis, especially among populations of affluent Western democratic polities where there is a surfeit of mass media information and some attempts at government policy responses to the problem. In considering the cultural significance of climate change (CC)<sup>1</sup>, I examine two dimensions of CC knowledge/action: the growth of CC science and politics; and the increasing prominence of sceptical and denialist views.

The paper draws on ethnographic and survey research I have undertaken in one region of Australia, the Hunter Valley of NSW<sup>2</sup>. I explore the ways that understandings of climate change are linked to foundational meaning systems that include religious and secular motifs of apocalypse, eternity, happiness and renewal. I argue that apparently antagonistic CC positions are in fact interdependent, and have a dynamic coexistence with other cultural constructions of transcendence in a shifting terrain of public concern. Understanding these connections requires a cultural theory of humanity's commitment to the future, and eternity.

## **Growth of scientific evidence and political salience**

While scientific understanding of ACC has been around for a century or more, a constellation of events occurred in 2006 to bring this specialised body of knowledge to wider public attention, especially in Australia. These included: the much heralded draft 4th report of the IPCC<sup>3</sup>; the well-publicised Al Gore film, *An Inconvenient Truth*; and the UK government-sponsored Stern report on the economic effects of CC<sup>4</sup>. In Australia and particularly NSW, there was an enduring and serious drought, which many of those affected attributed to the process of CC. The widespread experience of drought, always a politically salient event in Australia, became part of the *phenomenology* of CC.

---

**1** When I refer to climate change in general, the abbreviation CC is used. When referring specifically to anthropogenic climate change, the abbreviation ACC is used. Global warming, a way of referring to the main specific effect of climate change, is abbreviated as GW, and global heating, a less euphemistic term, as GH.

**2** This research is funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Project, *Climate Change, Place and Community: An Ethnographic Study of the Hunter Valley, New South Wales* (DP0878089). Co-investigators are Glenn Albrecht and Nick Higginbotham.

**3** Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). 2007. Fourth Assessment Report: Climate Change 2007. <http://www.ipcc.ch/activity/ar.htm> Accessed 11 Feb 2007

**4** Stern N. 2006. Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change, 30 October 2006. London: HM Treasury [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent\\_reviews/stern\\_review\\_economics\\_climate\\_change/sternreview\\_index.cfm](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent_reviews/stern_review_economics_climate_change/sternreview_index.cfm) Accessed 30 Nov 2006

By 2006, CC sciences had accumulated a diverse and compelling evidence base for assertions of human caused global heating (GH), and there was increasing government funding support, international cooperation, and policy initiatives. A broad array of environmentalist groups, multilateral organisations and political parties has coalesced around this defining issue (so far) of the 21st century. The 2006 Stern Review concluded:

The scientific evidence is now overwhelming: climate change is a serious global threat, and it demands an urgent global response...Climate change will affect the basic elements of life for people around the world: access to water, food production, health, and the environment. Hundreds of millions of people could suffer hunger, water shortages and coastal flooding as the world warms... Because climate change is a global problem, the response to it must be international. It must be based on a shared vision of long-term goals and agreement on frameworks that will accelerate action over the next decade, and it must build on mutually reinforcing approaches at national, regional and international level.<sup>5</sup>

For those concerned to combat ACC, the conjunction of scientific evidence, environmentalist concern, broad public support and apparently proactive government and multilateral stances offered optimism for the future.

## ***The rise and fall of climate change concern***

These circumstances probably are sufficient to explain why attitudinal surveys of 2006 – 2007 show a peak of CC concern amongst broadly based population samples in Australia<sup>6</sup>. CC was a big new phenomenon: it became an issue in the federal election campaign, it dominated the news cycle, and it met the criteria for a 'crisis'. This triggered a significant political response, in Australia and internationally, with various renewable energy projects and carbon pricing schemes developed or strengthened in many countries. The international culmination was the UN- sponsored Copenhagen Climate Summit in December 2009, now recorded in the annals of history as a spectacular failure in multilateral cooperation on an issue of global urgency.

The Hunter Valley Research Foundation annual environmental attitudes survey of the Hunter region for 2006 showed that 80% of respondents believed that CC would have a direct impact on their lives in the next 20 years, and 76% would be prepared to pay more for electricity generated from renewable sources. In the Lowy Institute Annual Poll on Australian Attitudes toward Global Warming, 68% of respondents in 2006 said that GW is a serious and pressing problem.

---

<sup>5</sup> Stern N. 2006. Summary of conclusions. In Stern Review: The Economics of Climate Change, p vi. London: HM Treasury UK, [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/9/9/CLOSED\\_SHORT\\_executive\\_summary.pdf](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/9/9/CLOSED_SHORT_executive_summary.pdf). Accessed 24 Mar 2010

<sup>6</sup> See Department of Climate Change (Australian Government). 2009. *Climate Change Household Action Campaign Evaluation Report*: <http://www.climatechange.gov.au/about/publications/pubs/think-change-evaluation-report.pdf> Accessed 28 Sept 2009. Lowy Institute for International Policy. 2009. *The Lowy Institute Poll 2009*. Sydney: Fergus Hanson. Hunter Valley Research Foundation. 2009. *Hunter Region Environmental Attitudes Survey 2008-9, Working Paper No. 3/09*. Newcastle: HVRF, pp.1-10.



**Table 1: Environmental Attitudes Surveys, Hunter Region, 2006-2009**

	HVRF (Hunter Valley) 2006	HVRF (Hunter Valley) 2008-9
<b>Direct impact of CC on yr life?</b>	80% (agree)	64% (agree)
<b>Willing to pay more for renewable elec?</b>	76% (agree)	56% (agree)
<b>Main impact of CC on economy?</b>	17% (agree)	34% (agree)
<b>Coal industry more positive than negative effects for region?</b>	46% (agree)	56% (agree)

Hunter Valley Research Foundation. 2009. *Hunter Region Environmental Attitudes Survey 2008-9, Working Paper No. 3/09*. Newcastle: HVRF, pp.1-10.

**Table 2: Lowy Institute Environmental Attitudes Surveys, Australia, 2006-2009**

	Lowy Institute (Australia) 2006	Lowy Institute (Australia) 2009
<b>GW a serious &amp; pressing problem</b>	68% (agree)	48% (agree)

Lowy Institute for International Policy. 2009. *The Lowy Institute Poll 2009*. Sydney: Fergus Hanson.

However, by 2008, reported public CC concern receded. CC no longer met popular and news cycle expectations of a “crisis” – it had been going on too long, had few visible catastrophes associated with it, and a solution was not in sight.

The 2009 results for the surveys mentioned above are telling: in the Hunter Region, in 2009, 64% of people affirmed that CC would have a direct impact on their lives in the next 20 years, compared to 80% in 2006. With regard to willingness to pay more for electricity from renewable sources, 56% agreed in 2008 compared to 76% in 2006. The Lowy national survey recorded 48% of respondents in 2009 agreeing that “global warming is a serious and pressing problem”, compared to 68% in 2006<sup>7</sup>.

These shifts may be associated with changing experiences of climate. In Australia, the drought that affected the country so badly in 2006 – 2007 had eased in most areas by 2008. In the Upper Hunter Valley, an area with severe water shortages, some informants in the author’s study commented that the lifting of the drought was a sign that CC was receding<sup>8</sup>. A view of climate as naturally cyclical, rather than progres-

---

<sup>7</sup> These surveys show marked age and gender differences. Women and younger age groups are more likely to be concerned about CC than men (or at least acknowledging the reality of anthropogenic CC). For example, in the December 2009 survey of Hunter Region residents by the Hunter Valley Research Foundation, 65.2% of women agreed that “human activities are causing significant changes to the earth’s climate” while only 54.2% of men agreed. By age, 75.5% of 18-34 year olds agreed with the statement, contrasted with 49.0% in the 65+ age group. <http://www.hvrf.com.au/pages/design/links/uploaded/HunterAtAGlance2010.pdf>. Accessed 25 Mar 2010

<sup>8</sup> In the northern hemisphere, a particularly cold winter was another sort of experiential challenge to assertions of GH.

sively heating due to carbon emissions, was frequently expressed, as in the following examples from the Upper Hunter and Lake Macquarie:

“There is climate change but it is a natural change. It’s a cyclical change.”

“Climate change is a natural cycle.”

“I think that climate change is a load of crap. Mother Nature will fix things up.”

“I don’t agree with global warming, it’s a natural cycle. Volcanoes let out more CO<sub>2</sub> than we do.”

“Climate change is part of the natural rhythm of the earth and plants and animals have always had to adapt.”

“Waste of time. It’s nature repeating itself.”

Survey responses also suggest that people are now more sensitive to the deleterious economic effects of CC prevention or remediation. In the Hunter region surveys, 34% of respondents in 2009 agreed that “the main impacts of climate change would be on the economy”, compared to 17% in 2007. In a similar vein, the number of people agreeing with the statement “Benefits to the region of the coal industry outweigh the negative impacts” rose from 46% in 2006, to 56% in 2008. Such shifts in priorities and concerns can be related in part to the global financial crisis of 2008 – 2009, and to the filtering through of the message that putting a price on carbon is going to involve a cost for all<sup>9</sup>. It should be noted however that by early 2010 much of the Australian electorate was not supportive of the federal Labor government’s withdrawal of the Emissions Trading Scheme legislation, and the loss of support in the subsequent election has been partly attributed to this (Hartcher 2010). A similar expectation of government action on CC from US polls, even while self-reported concern has dropped, has been analysed by Krosnick (2010).

The scientific evidence for ACC’s palpable effects on many parts of the planet is growing apace.<sup>10</sup> Climate change science retains its status as the dominant scientific orthodoxy despite some recent well-publicised errors and lapses of rigour. The Australian government’s Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency website devotes considerable space to debunking the ‘myths’ against climate change.<sup>11</sup>

However supporting the science is politically much easier than developing the solutions, especially where the palpability of CC is not being experienced by voters. As one Hunter Valley sceptic commented in the author’s study, “I haven’t seen sea levels rise and I live across the road from the beach.” Transnational environmental movements and concerted political commitment in many parts of the world have not

---

<sup>9</sup> Surveys in other countries indicate similar changes in attitudes towards climate change during the period under discussion. See for example Giddens (2009), and Laboratory for Energy and the Environment, 2007 *A survey of public attitudes towards climate change and climate change mitigation technologies in the United States: Analyses of 2006 results, April 2007*. Cambridge, MA: Laboratory for Energy and the Environment. In the latter survey conducted across the USA, global warming was named as the “most important environmental problem” by 11% of people in 2003 compared to 34% in 2006.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, IPCC Climate Change 2007: Working Group II: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability: Summary for Policymakers [http://www.ipcc.ch/publications\\_and\\_data/ar4/wg2/en/spm.html](http://www.ipcc.ch/publications_and_data/ar4/wg2/en/spm.html) Accessed 22 March 2020

<sup>11</sup> Australian Government Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency <http://www.climatechange.gov.au/government/international/global-action-facts-and-fiction/cc-action.aspx> Accessed 24 March 2010



achieved the necessary carbon reduction policies. The power of the carbon lobby and other vested interests, as well as globally pervasive market fundamentalism are clearly important in the failure of any large scale policies to achieve carbon emission reduction targets.

## ***The flourishing of scepticism and denial***

Proponents of CC scepticism and denial, in their various forms, have become a loud and visible force in the public debates about CC. Some of the response trends in the surveys cited above also suggest an actual growth of sceptical attitudes towards GW in the people surveyed, rather than merely lowered concern about the issue.

Economic explanations for the “recent attacks on the science of global warming” such as that proposed by Al Gore may well account for the decline in CC *concern* discussed above. Gore argues that:

The globalization of the economy, coupled with the outsourcing of jobs from industrial countries, has simultaneously heightened fears of job losses in the industrial world and encouraged rising expectations in emerging economies. The result? Heightened opposition, in both the industrial and developing worlds, to any constraints on the use of carbon-based fuels, which remain our principal source of energy (Gore 2010).

However this argument seems neither complete nor anthropologically satisfying to account for the burgeoning of CC *denial and scepticism* that, while often not scientifically well-informed, is far more accessible in the realm of popular culture and mass media than climate science.

In Australia, the list of prominent climate sceptics spans politics (Tony Abbott, Barnaby Joyce, Nick Minchin, Steve Fielding, Martin Ferguson); university-based science (Ian Plimer, Bill Kininmoth, Bob Carter, David Evans); journalism (Andrew Bolt, Miranda Devine, Christopher Pearson, Piers Akerman, Alan Jones); and religious leadership (Cardinal George Pell). Most do not publish in refereed journals, but their opinions are loudly heard in the public domain. Blogs, websites and social network sites, talkback radio, books and magazines are replete with their opinions. The influence of anti-CC lobby groups such as the Lavoisier Group (Ray Evans), the Climate Sense Coalition (Viv Forbes), the Australian Climate Science Coalition (Max Rheese) and the Climate Sceptics Party (Leon Ashby) has been well-documented by Guy Pearse in his “greenhouse mafia” thesis developed in his book *High and Dry* (2007), and his essay on mining in Australia, *Quarry Vision* (2009).

The range of views is diverse, from outright denial of CC to scepticism about its anthropogenic causes. Some of the assertions include: “the world has been cooling since 1998;” the world is getting warmer but we don’t know the real causes;” CC is caused by solar activity or other natural cycles, not by humans;” “there is no consensus among scientist and the IPCC is a small coterie of researchers which is using its UN power base to silence others views;” “why believe long-term predictions when meteorologists cannot even say it will rain next week;” and, “United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change negotiations are really trying to establish a ‘World Government’.”<sup>12</sup>

While scepticism takes many forms, it is not the dominant position of those conducting research in the climate sciences. A recent survey of climate science publications found that “97–98% of the climate researchers most actively publishing in the field surveyed here support the tenets of ACC outlined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change” (Anderegg et al. 2010). Sceptics are loud voices but the science they draw on to make their claims is not as rigorous as exponents of ACC. Anderegg et al.’s survey also concluded “the relative climate expertise and scientific prominence of the researchers unconvinced of ACC are substantially below that of the convinced researchers” (2010). The sceptics’ successful harvesting of doubt is reflected in some of the comments of Hunter Valley residents in the author’s study:

“There are so many conflicting sides with the academics. Who should we believe?”

“I am more concerned about the terrorists than climate change: they are a real threat, whereas climate change is not a proven thing. Even the scientists can’t seem to agree. I don’t know who to believe.”

“We are getting brain washed by a few scientists. We aren’t getting the alternate view as we aren’t reading enough of the science magazines.”

## ***The mortality message of climate change***

While the simultaneous growth of CC science and CC scepticism appear to be contradictory trends, I argue that they are interdependent, and can perhaps best be illuminated by reference to Ernest Becker’s work, over thirty years ago, on terror of death as the fundamental ontological anxiety of humans, and the denial of death as the work of culture in conscious and unconscious domains.

Drawing on cultural theory and depth psychology of Freud and dissident psychoanalysts such as Otto Rank and Erich Fromm, Becker argued that the denial of death and the perpetuation of self and social collectivity is a fundamental element of all cultural worlds, whether religious or profane. He drew on evolu-

---

<sup>12</sup> For summaries of these arguments, see Cubby (2008) and the Australian Government Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency website <http://www.climatechange.gov.au/en/government/international/global-action-facts-and-fiction/cc-action.aspx> Accessed 24 March 2010

tionary theory for the insight that: “This absolute dedication to Eros, to perseverance, is universal among organisms, and is the essence of life on this earth...” (1975:2). The consciousness of death however is the “unique paradox of the human condition” (1975:3). At the organismic level, there is a conscious quest for endurance; culture provides the “alter-organism” that allows the symbolic transcendence of the individual life, and its endowment with meaning beyond death. Culture is, among other things, a collective means of repressing awareness of mortality and provides the framework of symbols and behaviours that counter ontological anxiety about death. Messages or events that bring thoughts about death into consciousness, in many forms, may stimulate a range of conscious and unconscious defences from denial and postponement to marginalisation of outsiders, as well as an increase in actions that enhance self-esteem by strengthening feelings of immortality.

In his posthumous work, *Escape from Evil* (1975), Becker argues that many “heroic” (i.e. immortality focussed) meaning systems contain their own undoing in the production of evil. Their behavioural correlates (such as scapegoating, war, genocide, environmental exploitation) boost self-esteem but paradoxically accelerate mortality and finitude. Becker explored the possibility of “non-destructive myths” that acknowledge objective conditions of human misery without marginalizing and dehumanizing other humans, and without the annihilation of other life forms, and nature itself.

From this perspective, the flood of information in public discourse and mass media about the threat of ACC to all forms of life on the planet constitutes a massively salient harbinger of mortality that is bound to trigger a gamut of defence mechanisms, from the consciously articulated expressions of scepticism, denial and apathy to unconsciously driven carbon-profligate behaviour, as well as embrace of ideologies and leaders who deny the science and the catastrophic consequences of ACC.<sup>13</sup>

## ***Religion and climate change – Hunter Valley interviews***

Becker saw religion as the age-old cultural defence of humans against the terror of mortality. Up until the Enlightenment, the control of nature and defence against mortality was based in the control of nature by ritual and sacrifice. His sources became more Eurocentric after his cross-cultural survey of religion in stateless societies.<sup>14</sup> Christianity emerged “as a new form of democratic, universal, magical self-renewal” (1975:69) but was appropriated by royal authority. He did not see state corrupted institutionalised religions as the basis of a constructive contemporary challenge to destructive immortality strivings. These ideas raise questions about the response of contemporary religionists to the mortality threat of CC. In 2009 – 2010, in the author’s study, interviews with religious and spirituality adherents in the Hunter Valley explored re-

---

**13** Janis Dickinson (2009) has drawn on Becker’s ideas to consider climate change responses, using the theory of “terror management” that social psychologists have developed from Becker’s work.

**14** Becker’s neglect of non-Western “world religions” such as Buddhism and Hinduism is unfortunate as their approach to death and dying may have posed more of a challenge to his theories.

spondents' feelings and images of CC; relationship between religion/spirituality and nature/environment; the contribution of religion to adherents' understanding and interpretation of CC; and possible actions to take against CC.<sup>15</sup>

The causes of CC and its seriousness are intertwined questions in most people's thinking, and almost all respondents linked CC/GH to some form of moral decline, and also to human agency. Most also linked CC to the threat of an ending, although there was a variety of "end" scenarios, dominated by humanistic rather than apocalyptic views. A number of people commented that CC could bring about the end of humanity, but felt other species would survive and evolve. The prospect that some human cultures and communities would not survive CC because of poverty and specific geoclimatic vulnerability was also expressed by several interviewees, and often linked to a social justice agenda. Yet others discussed their concern relating to the survival/extinction of other species, and the value of ecosystems in their own right. Scientific understandings of CC catastrophe were more commonly expressed than religious understandings and the near prospect of the "tipping point" (Hansen 2005) was enunciated by several interviewees.<sup>16</sup> Buddhist doctrine, affirming the truth of impermanence of all things, could be interpreted as an acceptance of the inevitability of CC. However the Western Buddhists interviewed emphasised the spiritual values of harm minimisation and compassion, which provide a path for action on CC.

Despite the majority of the interviewees being adherents of Christian religions (18/25), only one Pentecostal pastor cited a divine (Biblical) cause of CC, identifying it with an apocalypse precursor in the Judaeo-Christian sense. Moral critiques of contemporary society and culture (and in the case of Buddhism, humanity) are present in every case. Many of the interviewees subscribed to a prophetic discourse of moral degeneration in humans' relationship to nature/the Earth, while denying that CC was divinely caused. For example, Janice, a Quaker, commented that the Earth's decline was inevitable (because of human failings) and had to be "coped with":

I certainly have no sense that this is God bringing a punishment on us because of what we do to the Earth. We're doing it to the Earth and this is happening, and I have a sense of inevitability about it, that we have to manage it, we have to cope with it, as much as trying to slow it down and halt it.

Most of those interviewed apportioned blame variously to the systems of capitalism/consumerism, the wastefulness and greed of society and individuals, as well as poor stewardship of nature, and population increase. Capitalism and consumerism was identified by some as a secular religion, a "faith that has dominion over the earth in a dangerous way" (Lee, Quaker).

---

**15** These interviews were undertaken as part of the Australian Research Council funded project mentioned above. There were 25 religious adherents interviewed as of March 2010 (including Anglicans, Catholics, Quakers, Western Buddhists, Pentecostal and other charismatic and fundamentalist denominations) – selected through a purposive recruitment process for semi-structured interviews.

**16** The "tipping point" is the point "when the climate reaches a state such that strong amplifying feedbacks are activated by only moderate additional warming." - possibly as close as 2016. (Hansen 1 June 2007, cited in <http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/jun2007/2007-06-01-01.asp> Accessed 8 December 2009 Accessed 22 March 2020)

The majority of the Christians interviewed could be situated along a continuum from text based theology to sacramental theology (whereby nature can be understood as a sacramental disclosure of God). Whilst fundamentalists could be situated at one extreme (text based), most people were inclined to the other end of the continuum, where “sacramental ecology” can be located. Among these adherents, there is a personal responsibility for one’s actions, as individual persons are situated as part of the environment. This is often combined with the more transcendental religious theme of stewardship, whereby one is *responsible for* the environment, which can be acted upon in a range of ways.

This sacramental element of Christian theology develops the more “immanent” (as opposed to transcendental) aspects of Christian religion, and overlaps to a considerable degree with the Buddhist ontology of interconnectedness and impermanence of all things, reincarnation, and the ethic of compassion and non-harm, which also provides a framework for personal conservationist action. The interdependence of all life is one of the primary Buddhist principles and as such was discussed by all Western Buddhists interviewed, who saw this as evidence of the environmental relevance of Buddhism as well as a framework for action.

In general, these were well-informed and concerned people who affirmed the human causes of CC, and took a moderate and humanistic (and not particularly religious) approach to strategies of amelioration and prevention. In the light of other information from the larger Hunter Valley CC study, and the survey responses summarised earlier, they are perhaps an atypical group in their acknowledgement of the seriousness of the CC reality, and their lack of defence mechanisms against it. In discussing the future, interviewees did not envisage fundamental changes in power structures but rather focused on “true democracy” where change took place from the grass roots up. Some of the actions included “localised living”, strengthening the sustainability of community life-styles, and reducing carbon footprints. Their ideals evoke Becker’s interpretation of early Christianity’s promise of “universal democratic equality” (1975:70).

These visions for change have much in common with many non-spiritual environmentalist positions. In summary, among non-Charismatic religious adherents, there is a convergence of theistic and nontheistic conservation spiritualities, which in turn converge with other ecological framings of human/nature relationships found in many forms of environmentalist thought. The ideas of Pentecostalist adherents who were interviewed are discussed below in the section on apocalyptic visions.

## ***Consumer capitalism as an immortality system***

Environmentalism and CC concern have often been proposed as a ‘secular religion’, especially by antagonists for whom this epithet is a marker of blind faith in the irrational.<sup>17</sup> A more pervasive set of immortality

---

<sup>17</sup> For example, see Dyson, F. 2008 “The question of global warming.” *The New York Review of Books* 55(10), June 12 <http://content.imamu.edu.sa/Scholars/it/net/dyson%202008%20nyr.pdf> Accessed 28 June 2010

beliefs than environmentalism, however, is inherent in corporate capitalism. In Australia, capitalism is not just the dominant economic system but also supports a powerful cultural system, with “brands” and money the symbolic media. In contrast to the drudgery of most people’s work, those who earn income can self-actualise as consumers. Consumerism engenders and sustains feelings of pleasure and future security through linking self-identity with values and practices of acquisition, affluence, endless exploitation of nature, novelty, and perpetual renewal. It is arguably the dominant immortality project (in Becker’s terms) of contemporary Australian society and inflects all others, such as sport. In defending against the terrors of the world, Becker argues that the person coming to adulthood, in any social group, “learns to embed himself [sic] in other-power, both of concrete persons and of things and cultural commands” (1973: 23). The other-power of the things that are consumer commodities is highly elaborated in contemporary capitalist societies through brands and commodity proliferation. Celebrities, not deities, religious or political leaders, are the personages who are worshipped as they manifest the core cultural values.

Some seven decades earlier, William James, in his lectures on “The Sick Soul” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) articulated the phenomenological essence of secularist anomie and its fragility as an immortality system:

This sadness lies at the heart of every merely positivistic, agnostic, or naturalistic scheme of philosophy. Let sanguine healthy-mindedness do its best with its strange power of living in the moment and ignoring and forgetting, still the evil background is really there to be thought of, and the skull will grin in at the banquet (119).

But in the 21st century, in a way of life that celebrates living in the moment, ignoring and forgetting, who is allowed to feel unhappy or worried, to acknowledge the sadness “at the heart”? Modern life seems pervaded by affluence, security, satedness, and comfort. Levels of ease have risen exponentially compared to earlier eras. Richard Heinberg observes:

If we were to add together the power of all the fuel-fed machines that we rely on to light and heat our homes, transport us, and otherwise keep us in the style to which we have become accustomed, and then compare that total with the amount of power that can be generated by the human body, we would find each American has the equivalent of over 150 ‘energy slaves’ working for us twenty-four hours a day.<sup>18</sup>

Worldwatch Institute recently reported that the average American consumes more than his or her weight in products each day.<sup>19</sup> As summarised by *The Guardian Weekly*:

In the last decade, consumption of goods and services rose 28% to \$30.5 trillion. The consumer culture is no longer a mostly American habit. Over the last 50 years, excess has been adopted as a symbol of success in developing countries from Brazil to India to China, the [Worldwatch] report said..... Such trends were not a result of economic growth, the report said, but of deliberate efforts

---

<sup>18</sup> Richard Heinberg, 2003. *The Party’s Over*. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 31, cited in Giddens 2009, 36.

<sup>19</sup> Worldwatch Institute 2010 *State of the World Report 2010* <http://www.worldwatch.org/sow10> Accessed 22nd March 2010



by businesses to win over consumers. Products such as the hamburger and bottled water are now commonplace (22 January 2010, 10).

Just as CC threat has spawned scepticism, the global financial crisis has strengthened the cultural production of happiness. In the US, where economic stress for many is severe, there is a plethora of new happiness books to assist those dealing with bankruptcy, negative mortgage equity, homelessness and unemployment. Gretchen Rubin's *The Happiness Project* recently hit number 1 on the *New York Times* self-help bestseller list. "The spring book lists are teeming with beaming" reports the *New York Times* (10).

In considering the efficacy of these defence mechanisms against the threat of annihilation, it is worth remembering a Freudian insight about repression: it is "not simply a negative force opposing life energies; it lives on life energies and uses them creatively" (as expressed by Becker, 1973, 21). Intimations of mortality are resisted and defended against in a variety of ways. An anthropological question thus arises: What symbolic system in Australia today can compete with or replace the life-affirming messages of consumer capitalism? The "no growth" prescriptions of many environmental activists and CC policymakers are all too readily experienced as death message solutions to an already highly unpalatable end of world scenario. As "growth" in many contexts equals "life," the unconscious resistance to these ideas is considerable.

## ***Apocalyptic visions and new worlds***

Another cultural meaning system introduced at the beginning of this paper is that associated with ideas of Apocalypse. The term derives from the Greek *apokalupsis* (to uncover or unveil) and there is a literary genre of early Jewish and Christian writing called "apocalypse" that treats of God's revelations to humans.<sup>20</sup> In the Bible, the Book of Revelation (also known as Apocalypse) specifically prophesies the end of the world associated with God's judgment and salvation of the faithful. In colloquial English, "apocalypse" can refer to any catastrophic event especially those that feature elements of large scale death and destruction reminiscent of the Biblical imagery. Climate change, holding the seeds of such annihilation, is often expressed as an imminent apocalypse.

The Christian faiths most closely associated with Apocalypse belief are Pentecostalism and its variants in the Charismatic movement. Pentecostalism and other Charismatic denominations are growing in many parts of the world, and comprise the second largest grouping of Christian faiths internationally with about 500 million followers in 1999 (Poloma 2000). In Australia since 1996, the fastest-growing Australian Christian denomination is Pentecostal, increasing by 26% (to around 220,000) by the 2006 census.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 2007. Augmented Third Edition, New Revised Standard Version, ed. Michael D. Coogan. Oxford University Press, New Testament Introduction to Revelation of John, p. 420.

<sup>21</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/7d12b0f6763c78caca257061001cc588/6ef598989db79931ca257306000d52b4> Accessed 20 March 2010

The key features of Pentecostalism are its “experientially God-centered” world view, with the Holy Spirit connecting all worldly phenomena; literal Biblicism (like other Fundamentalist groups) and a view of the Bible as a living book in which “the Holy Spirit is always active;” experiential knowledge through the direct encounter with God; an anti-bureaucratic church structure; and end time beliefs (Poloma 2000).

In the author’s Hunter Valley study, several Pentecostalist Christians were interviewed, and their views are summarised briefly. Ray, a Pentecostal minister, viewed CC as due to the will of God, and scripturally preordained as an end time precursor:

I believe, we’re facing climate change around the world, which is prefacing the end time events of the scriptures. We’re seeing an increase in floods, we’re seeing an increase in mudslides, we’re seeing an increase in earthquakes, we’re seeing an increase in famine and fires. Every aspect of climate is set in the records. Um, now if we analyse that according to the scriptures, it would indicate that.

For Ray, CC goes hand in hand with the moral decline of society. He stressed God was allowing the decline, not forcing it, hence the responsibility was with people to choose Christ:

So God is simply allowing him [Satan] to degenerate the world, in the basis that, in the end, I mean, our time on earth is [clicking fingers] is but a vapour to eternity. Eternity is a long time. Now the Bible says there are only two places in eternity, that’s heaven and hell. So if we haven’t chosen Christ, if we haven’t chosen heaven through Christ, then in actual fact, we’ve chosen hell. They are pretty serious consequences. Now you can reason hell any way you like, but if you read the word, it’s a hell of a place. It is exactly as the Bible describes it. How do I know? We are so close to end time, that God is allowing people to go to hell, and check it out.

Others, who also preached the scripturally ordained end time, did not necessarily see CC as part of it. Vince (a Seventh Day Adventist) stated that as a Creationist he believed creation had some purpose, but that was in God’s hands. He did not know whether CC had anything to do with end-time events, and that did not stop him from trying to do something about it. He favoured a science-based discourse of the “tipping point” over a religious explanation.

They talk about that tipping point where, if we go beyond that, that it’s going to be difficult if not impossible to then try and reverse that trend toward global warming. So, but, yeah I don’t believe that the end of the world is nigh. But at the same time I think that the governments around the world should have begun acting some time ago, and if they haven’t they need to get on with it pronto.

Denial of CC is also compatible with Pentecostalist beliefs, as articulated by Will, another person interviewed. Will was keen to discuss in detail the East Anglia email hacking and 4th IPCC report errors. He said that he “[didn’t] believe the science was there”, “the earth has been on a normal warming cycle” and “most... of the world’s scientist’s don’t believe in global warming.” He stated that “there’s a fair bit or arrogance in man to think he can fix the future of the world”, and “God will decide when the world ends”. He didn’t think Christians were particularly protected from disasters in this world.



Will gave expression to another important strand of Christian fundamentalist thinking: the use of CC as a pretext for forming a World Government. “The Bible talks about one World Government, it talks about the rise of the anti-Christ. I believe we’re on the threshold of something like that.” For Will, evidence included the fact that the Copenhagen summit already had a draft agreement with “the appointment of this committee, to oversee, and indeed bring down punishments, upon companies and countries that they don’t rule over, and taxing them, and even imprisonment on people who aren’t complying with their message.” In this understanding, CC is not just a negative message about the entropy of the planet, but a challenge to the community of believers and their democratic rights. It is an instrument of the anti-Christ, and therefore a threat to the prospect of a post-Apocalypse afterlife for the born-again faithful.

The challenge of CC for fundamentalist Christians relates to their belief that redemption is based on faith not works. This is at the other end of the spectrum to the sacramental theologies of the other religious adherents whose interviews were discussed above. The role of pastors is to minister to increasing numbers of people in order to provide them with the opportunity of salvation, whether or not CC is implicated in end of world events.

It appears paradoxical that the CC apocalypse meets with strong resistance from the Christian faiths of the Apocalypse. But not all Apocalypses are the same. Unlike the CC scenario, the Pentecostalist Apocalypse is only a prelude to another life – the end of “first things”, and the path for a “new heaven and new earth.” It is not a final ending for the faithful, who will be born again. In this, it shares many features with other immortality systems, and with earlier forms of Christianity, wherein Becker noted “the individual could fashion his own salvation, independent of any earthly authority” (1975:69).

## ***New Jerusalem in outer space***

The tenets of Pentecostalism find a parallel in the profane realms of entrepreneurship and science, where there is an efflorescence of movements that prophesy apocalyptic ends but also a new life of a quite different order away from the perils of a heated Earth. For example, the World Economic forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January 2010 featured a panel on “Life on other planets” with speakers exploring the possibilities of finding new habitable worlds to support business in outer space (Capeto 2010). The star speaker was Dimitar Sasselov, director of Harvard University’s Origins of Life Initiative Project.<sup>22</sup> Sasselov discovered the exosolar world OGLE-TR-56b (that he unofficially named after his wife, Sheila). He said:

It’s feasible that we’ll meet other sentient life forms and conduct commerce with them.” ... “We don’t now have the technology to physically travel outside our solar system for such an exchange to take place, but we are like Columbus centuries ago, learning fast how to get somewhere few think

---

<sup>22</sup> Harvard University *Origins of Life Initiative* <http://origins.harvard.edu/index.html> Accessed 28 June 2010

possible” (quoted in Capeto 2010).

Sasselov says he hopes to stir realization that research about other planets can “redefine life as we know it” and eventually create a market in the Milky Way and beyond.

These self-styled culture heroes frequently compare their endeavours to those of Christopher Columbus, bringing to mind Becker’s interrogation of the social forms of heroic transcendence of mortality in each human epoch (1975:154).<sup>23</sup> Another panelist, Brad Durham, said:

Businessmen once thought Columbus was ridiculous, but he was the adventure capitalist who helped create globalization. [He continued:] People in my field pay serious attention to Sasselov’s work because what’s knowable in our business can be thrown out the window real fast. It’s likely going to take many lifetimes before we can take advantage of outer space as an emerging market, but it’s best not to be hobbled by the lack of imagination on Earth(quoted in Capeto 2010).

Physicist David Livingston has developed a *Code of Ethics for Off-Earth Commerce* to guide humankind’s conduct in their contacts with aliens. He says:

We’re committed to ensuring a free-market economy off- Earth... Treat outer space with respect, concern and thoughtful deliberation, regardless of the presence or absence of life forms (quoted in Capeto 2010).

The Washington D.C. based National Space Society, less mindful of off-Earth life forms, has as its Vision Statement “People living and working in thriving communities beyond the Earth, and the use of the vast resources of space for the dramatic betterment of humanity.”<sup>24</sup>

There are many differences between Christian fundamentalists and market fundamentalists, but they are similar in their commitment to immortality ideologies that seek new worlds, whether New Jerusalems or exoplanets, beyond the present Earth, when Earth is used up either by the fires of the Apocalypse or exploitation, resource depletion and GH.

## **Conclusion**

In *Escape from Evil*, Becker wrote: “...cultures are fundamentally and basically styles of heroic death denial” (p. 125). The heroism consists in the many types of cultural projects that allow individuals to be recognised and valued within symbolic domains that reference immortality. The paradox of culture is the capacity for immortality projects to generate evil. Becker pointed, among other things, to genocide, war, and environmental devastation. With regard to the last, he said:

---

<sup>23</sup> Most of the off-Earth visionaries are men, like the explorers of former eras, inviting a gender analysis of forms of heroic transcendence which is beyond the scope of this paper (and which Becker also neglected).

<sup>24</sup> National Space Society <http://www.nss.org/> Accessed 28 June 2010

...the hope of Faustian man was that he would discover Truth, obtain the secret to the workings of nature, and so assure the complete triumph of man over nature, his apotheosis on earth. Not only has Faustian man failed to do this, but he is actually ruining the very theater of his own immortality with his own poisonous and madly driven works; once he had eclipsed the sacred dimension, he had only the earth left to testify to the value of his life. This is why, I think, even one-dimensional politicians and bureaucrats, in both capitalist and communist countries, are becoming anxious about environmental collapse; the earth is the only area of self-perpetuation in the new ideology of Faustian man (EE, 1975, p. 72).

I have suggested that there are still salient immortality projects, both religious and secular, that envision human self-perpetuation beyond this life and this earth. Defensive responses, conscious and unconscious, to the encroaching reality of ACC can be traced to these elemental human projects. In considering these projects, we must include the Faustian bargain many contemporary societies have struck with nature to achieve transcendence through material wealth and consumer satisfactions. Whether the leaders and citizens of the Earth's nations are able to extricate themselves from this bargain is a problem that requires a comparative cultural analysis of humanity's visionings of immortality, death and survival to facilitate deeper insights into the politics and knowledge of CC. Immortality ideologies of one form or another seem inescapable in human existence. It is imperative that some are harnessed productively to transform future prospects for the planet, while still nourishing our fragile human hopes of eternity.

## **References**

- Anderegg, W. R. L., James W. Prall, J. W., Harold, J. and Stephen H. Schneider, S. H. 2010 Expert credibility in climate change. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* Early Edition 21 June [www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1003187107](http://www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1003187107)
- Australian Bureau of Statistics <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/7d12b0f6763c78caca257061001cc588/6ef598989db79931ca257306000d52b4>. Accessed 20 March 2010
- Australian Government Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency <http://www.climatechange.gov.au/government/international/global-action-facts-and-fiction/cc-action.aspx>. Accessed 24 March 2010
- Baer, H. 2009 Waiting for Global Warming: Climate Politics in Australia – Perspectives from Above and Below. In Hage, G. (ed): *Waiting*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Becker, E. 1973 *Denial of Death*. New York: The Free Press
- Becker, E. 1975 *Escape from Evil*. New York: The Free Press
- Coogan, Michael D. (ed.) *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 2007. Augmented Third Edition, New Revised Standard Version*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Copetas, A.C. 2010 Harvard Star-Gazer Sasselov Maps Space Frontier From Davos” [http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=allCE7adBQ\\_M](http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=allCE7adBQ_M) 25th January Accessed 20th

March 2010

Crate, S. A. and Nuttall, M. (eds) 2009 *Anthropology and Climate Change: From Encounters to Actions*. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, Inc.

Cubby B. 2008. Despite sceptics' noise, scientific consensus is growing. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2-3 August: 31

Department of Climate Change (Australian Government). 2009. *Climate Change Household Action Campaign Evaluation Report*: <http://www.climatechange.gov.au/about/publications/pubs/think-change-evaluation-report.pdf> Accessed 28 Sept 2009

Dickinson, J. 2009 'The People Paradox: Self-Esteem Striving, Immortality Ideologies, and Human Response to Climate Change.' *Ecology and Society* 14(1): 34-53

Dyson, F. 2008 The question of global warming. *The New York Review of Books* 55(10), June 12 <http://content.imamu.edu.sa/Scholars/it/net/dyson%202008%20nyr.pdf> Accessed 28 June 2010

Giddens, A. 2009 *The Politics of Climate Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press

Gore, A. 2010 We Can't Wish Away Climate Change, *New York Times*, Sunday Opinion, February 28, 11

Hartcher, P. 2010 Rudd's decline shows voters want reform but never retreat. *Sydney Morning Herald News Review* 3-4 July, 9

Hoffman, J. 2010 On top of the happiness racket. *New York Times*, 28 February 2010, Sunday, 1 & 10

Hunter Valley Research Foundation. 2009. *Hunter Region Environmental Attitudes Survey 2008-9, Working Paper No. 3/09*. Newcastle: HVRF, pp.1-10.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). 2007. Fourth Assessment Report: Climate Change 2007. <http://www.ipcc.ch/activity/ar.htm> Accessed 11 Feb 2007

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Climate Change 2007: Working Group II: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability: Summary for Policymakers [http://www.ipcc.ch/publications\\_and\\_data/ar4/wg2/en/spm.html](http://www.ipcc.ch/publications_and_data/ar4/wg2/en/spm.html) Accessed 22 March 2010

Krosnick, J.A. 2010 The Climate Majority. *The New York Times*, Op-Ed June 8, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/09/opinion/09krosnick.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/09/opinion/09krosnick.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1) Accessed 8th November 2010

Laboratory for Energy and the Environment, 2007 *A survey of public attitudes towards climate change and climate change mitigation technologies in the United States: Analyses of 2006 results, April 2007*. Cambridge, MA: Laboratory for Energy and the Environment

Lowy Institute for International Policy. 2009. *The Lowy Institute Poll 2009*. Sydney: Fergus Hanson

Macrae, G. 2010 What Can Anthropologists Say about Climate Change? *World Anthropologies Network No 5, July* [www.ram-wan.org/e-journal](http://www.ram-wan.org/e-journal)

Milton, K. 2008 Climate Change and Culture Theory: The Need to Understand Ourselves. *School of Philoso-*

*phy, Anthropology and Social Inquiry (PASI) Research Paper No. 1, Symposium Proceedings: The Impact of Global Warming on the Environment and Human Societies*, ed. H. Baer.

Pearse, G. 2007. *High and Dry: John Howard, climate change and the selling of Australia's future*. Camberwell Vic: Penguin Viking Books

Pearse, G. 2009. Quarry Vision: Coal, climate change and the end of the resources boom. *Quarterly Essay* Issue 33, 1-122

Poloma, Margaret M. 2000 *The Spirit Bade Me Go: Pentecostalism and Global Religion. Paper to Association for the Sociology of Religion Annual Meetings, August 11-13, Washington, D.C.*

Stern N. 2006. *Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change, 30 October 2006*. London: HM Treasury [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent\\_reviews/stern\\_review\\_economics\\_climate\\_change/sternreview\\_index.cfm](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent_reviews/stern_review_economics_climate_change/sternreview_index.cfm) Accessed 30 Nov 2006

Worldwatch Institute 2010 *State of the World Report 2010* <http://www.worldwatch.org/sow10> Accessed 22nd March 2010

## ***Acknowledgments***

Thanks to the Department of Anthropology and School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Sydney for supporting the symposium Anthropology and the Ends of Worlds (24-25 March 2010) for which my original presentation was prepared. I also wish to thank the Hunter Valley participants in the study, other members of the Hunter Valley research team, Sonia Freeman, Gillian Harris, Vanessa Bowden, Nick Higinbotham and Glenn Albrecht, and the anonymous reviewers of the paper. This research is funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Project (DP0878089).

## **Panel 2**

# **Prophecy and Eschatology**

*(Fri 26/03/2010; 9.30-11.00am)*

## **Spiritual Imagination and Societal Change in Indonesia: The Prophecies of King Jayabaya**

**Thomas Reuter**  
**University of Melbourne**

*When carriages drive without horses,  
ships fly through the sky,  
and a necklace of iron surrounds the island of Java  
When women wear men's clothing,  
and children neglect their aged parents,  
know that the time of madness has begun.*  
*From the Ramalan Jayabaya, Oral transmission, my translation.*

### **Abstract**

This paper provides a brief account of the sources, social history and philosophical underpinnings of prophecy in Java, leading on to a critique of modernist rationality. Most Indonesians are familiar with prophecies attributed to 12th century king Jayabaya and 14th century king Brawijaya V, and use prophecy as a means to both apprehend and shape the future. While my research has shown these texts have been in circulation for at least 300 years, they have drawn no Western attention to date, except briefly from Dutch colonial administrators who noticed the centrality of these prophecies in Indonesian's struggle for independence. The popularity of these texts consistently has increased in response to crises, including recent political upheavals and global warming.

The widespread popular use and high public profile of prophecy as a means of articulating political and spiritual aspirations for the future has few parallels in contemporary Western societies. Science has given us such a powerful description of the world, as it (supposedly) really is, that any other interpretation we may have is quickly dismissed as ‘mere belief’ or ‘subjective bias’. There are as yet few scientists who recognize that we, as human subjects, may need to integrate the objective knowledge we have gained from science into our personal experience. This is because such integration implies there are alternative means of apprehending reality, other than through pure reasoning though not necessarily opposed to it. While such alternatives are familiar, they are largely dismissed as pre-modern mysticism and not afforded any epistemological status. Popular prophecies such as those of Nostradamus thus tend to be marginal, or they are given unofficial recognition among select groups, as in the case of the highly politicised prophecies of Fatima.

Prophecy as a cultural practice challenges science’s hegemonic power to define reality, in two ways:

1) Prophecies and other forms of creative imagination rely on positing a belief of what the world will, could or should be, and motivate us to act in such a way as to change the real in line with what is imagined. Scientists tend to ignore this teleological dimension of reality, and thus exclude imaginary intent from the realm of the real. Even social science tends to dodge the paradox of imagination by seeking refuge in the layered reality concept of phenomenology, whereby imagination is considered real as a social phenomenon only rather than corresponding to an objective truth.

2) Prophecy in Java, more specifically, is imbedded in an ancient and profound mystical tradition whose proponents seek direct access to the truth through rigorous spiritual practices. These practices aim to cultivate the conscious exercise of “intent”, a human faculty that is said to differ from language-based reasoning and produces a form of awareness incorporating up to eleven dimensions rather than the usual three dimensions of human language-based consciousness. From the perspective of this form of awareness, the future can be apprehended.

**Keywords:** prophecy, imagination, social imaginary, rationality, politics, Java, Indonesia

## ***Introduction***

This paper is a preliminary introduction to the rather unusual literary genre of prophecy texts in Java, Indonesia. Following a brief social history of this genre, I will argue that these texts function as a means not simply of predicting but of imagining and actively shaping the future in the present. I combine this analysis with a critique of modernist notions of rationality, from the perspective of which prophecy texts would otherwise be all too easily dismissed as mythology. I will argue, instead, that texts of prophecy too base some of their rhetorical power on a rational analysis of historical facts and on careful observation of patterns of change across time, as does modern science, and that science in turn has its own apocalyptic and millenarian mythology. The difference is that the prophetic genre rests on the assumption that human beings, or at least some particularly gifted human beings, can draw on a mysterious source of intuitive insight to find answers where rationality cannot reach or tends to fail us for other reasons. While there have been a number of studies of millenarianism in Java (Kartodirdjo 1970, Suwandi 2000, Florida 1995), this literature tends to ignore the epistemological status of the phenomenon of prophecy as such, or explains it away in sociological terms.



## ***A social history of the Jayabaya corpus of prophecy texts***

There are two major sets of prophecies in the Javanese literary tradition, those attributed to the 12th century king Jayabaya of Kediri and those attributed to Sabdapalon, a royal counsellor to King Brawijaya V of Majapahit at the end of the 14th century. In this paper I will be discussing mainly the Jayabaya corpus of texts. First of all, I would like to examine this corpus of literature historically, both as a narrative and as a political tradition.

Almost every contemporary Indonesian has some familiarity with these major texts of Javanese prophecy. We are thus dealing with a popular genre, even though their knowledge may be confined to some of the prophecy's most pithy statements, such as the one cited above, which are circulated orally or in the media. The actual texts have had a more esoteric character in the past, but cheap reprints have been made widely available to the public at least since the late 19th century. The prophecies on the whole have been extremely popular, politically influential and contentious for at least 300 years.

In my very extensive search for the original literary sources of this tradition, I have collected, transcribed and translated more than sixty different early versions in Javanese language, none of which were published at the time when they were written. Later published versions of some of the texts are available in Indonesian language, but they are often incomplete or selective, and often fail to mention the source document. The earliest complete written Jayabaya prophecy text I was able to locate is from the royal library at the Pakualaman palace in Yogyakarta<sup>1</sup>. The scribe notes that he is transcribing this text in 1835, and hence it is evidently a copy of an earlier text (date unknown). The 1835 transcription has a foreword, wherein the scribe complains that his predecessor has Islamised the narrative, warning that such a manipulation of sacred knowledge can lead to dangerous personal consequences and misinterpretations. It is not difficult to see what the concerned scribe is referring to. For example, the narrative names the Sultan of 'Rum' (Constantinople / Istanbul, Turkey) as the one who initiated the original human settlement of Java rather than the Hindu saint Aji Saka, who is commonly named as the founder of civilization in Javanese folk tradition. A royal scribe would have been well aware of this. Nevertheless, this Islamised narrative still follows the general plot of the earlier, Hindu version quite closely in many respects. Fragments of the original Hindu version can still be found today, but most written versions I was able to collect show similar signs of a superimposed Islamic theology, cosmology and eschatology. Of these, the writings of the Surakarta poet and royal scribe Ronggowarsito, who first popularised the genre in the late 19th century, are perhaps the most well known. Meanwhile, oral versions of the Jayabaya prophecy are more conservative and retain many of the earlier Hindu themes.

---

<sup>1</sup> The text (local catalogue code 0061 / PP / 73; or Girardet 58560) is called *Serat Piwulang* and the relevant subsection of this collection is called *Jangka Jayabaya*. An unnamed palace scribe created this annotated collection from a variety of earlier manuscripts, upon the request of King Paku Alam II (1829-1858 M).

I therefore do believe it is possible to reconstruct the original version. This would be a complex philological project rather than an anthropological one, however, and would lead us away from the reality of the prophecies as they are read in Javanese society and used in politics. From this same, more practical perspective, it could also be argued that the fusion of Islamic and Hindu ideas in the prophecy texts did them no harm but made them all the more inclusive and effective, as a means of political mobilisation in a slowly Islamising society. If the texts have changed it is because Javanese society has also changed, and this in itself is a demonstration of how alive this literary tradition continues to be.

Java's great prophet Jayabaya has been compared to Nostradamus in the Western world, but the Jayabaya phenomenon is different in that his prophecies are not at all marginal but immensely popular and politically significant. Indeed, what little attention the text received in the West came from Dutch scholars of the mid 19th century (Hollander 1848). This is because one of the predictions in the prophecy is that Java would be freed from the oppressors from '*Nusa Prenggi*' (Europe) by a "Just King" or *Ratu Adil* who – like Jayabaya – shall come to earth as an emissary of Allah (similar to the Imam Mahdi of Islamic prophecy) or, in the original Hindu version, as a living incarnation of the supreme deity Vishnu. This prophecy inspired a number of rebellions against the Dutch colonial regime. The most famous one, perhaps, was under the leadership of Diponegoro, who was widely believed to be the predicted saviour or *ratu adil*. Another designation for this saviour is *satrio piningit*, the 'hidden knight or warrior'. Rumours of the appearance of this figure circulate periodically and until this day, especially at times when the country is seen to be in a state of crisis.

In my extensive search for references to the Jayabaya's prophecies through many hundreds of newspapers and magazines published during the 20th century, I have found countless attempts to relate the texts to current events and political struggles. Importantly, I discovered that an unusually high frequency of such references occurred during every major political crisis.

The first of these crises was the struggle for national independence. The prophecies were incredibly important at this time, and frequently mentioned in the political speeches and propaganda material of the independence movement. Indeed, after the initial departure of the Dutch, its leader, Sukarno, commissioned the publication of a curious book entitled "The Role of the Jayabaya Prophecies in Our Revolution". When the Dutch made their short comeback after WW2, they seized the book at the printers, and destroyed it, but it was later republished. In his foreword to the book, the former resistance leader - now the first President of independent Indonesia - identifies himself with the prophesised liberator, Ratu Amisan, but simultaneously stresses that ultimately the "just king" of the prophecies is none other than democracy, or in other words, a nation state based on equity and justice. This is a philosophical interpretation shared by many contemporary Indonesians, but the personalistic element is never quite relinquished because a just state is rightly seen to require a leader or a class of leaders who are able to "embody" such principles. Indeed, every time Indonesia has a new president he is identified as one of the future rulers predicted by Jayabaya. For example, interim President J. Habibie was frequently identified as the ruler whose reign the prophecy had predicted to last only "as long as a life cycle of the maize plant" (*sepanjang umur jagung*), or approximately 9 months.

A second major crisis that sparked interest in the prophecies took place in 1965 when General Suharto replaced President Sukarno in a military coup. Suharto was more closely associated with the prophecies of Sabdapalon than those of Jayabaya. He was widely believed to be the reincarnation of Sabdapalon, who in turn was an incarnation of the timeless literary figure Semar (or Dewa Ismaya), the royal advisor to the righteous Pandava princes in the Javanese shadow puppet theatre. Soeharto and his inner circle, under the leadership of a Javanese spiritual leader (*tokoh kejawen*), practiced a veritable cult of Semar. I gained first hand information about the immense influence Suharto's spiritual teacher had on political decision-making in an interview with former Secretary of State and Suharto's right hand man, Murdiono. I also had the chance to visit some of the sacred sites associated with this cult, especially at Mt Tidar and Mt Srandhil, two sacred sites near Semarang and Cilacap. In the prophecies of Sabdapalon the latter had promised to return and take charge of Java once more around the year 2000, 500 years after the great Hindu empire of Majapahit had fallen due to the introduction of Islam and subsequent civil war. He also promised that upon his return he would restore the old religion or *agama budi*, which is variously interpreted as signifying Hindu-Buddhism, or the religion of Javanese spiritual knowledge (*budi*), or even modern science. The prophecy is thus rather hostile toward Islam and, indeed, so was Suharto for the greater part of his reign. Most importantly, he ensured that the Indonesian state was based not on Islam but on the principle of *pancasila*, which in turn has its roots in Javanese mysticism. Until today, his successors have left this principle intact despite much renewed pressure from Islamic political movements in recent years.

Finally, the period leading up the fall of Suharto in 1998 and also the early years of the subsequent *reformasi* period witnessed another major resurgence in the popularity of the Jayabaya and Sabdapalon prophecies. Numerous re-publications of the texts appeared around this time, most of which were very inexpensive productions and have sold large numbers of copies. I have already mentioned Habibie, but similar stories were circulated about how his successors Abdurahman Wahid (alias 'Gus Dur') and Megawati Sukarnoputri ought to be situated within the chronology of the prophetic texts. I was also able to determine that, during their candidature, both of these presidents visited sacred sites associated with the prophecy, such as the Loka Moksa Jayabaya in the village of Pamenang, Kediri. This is the site where the prophet king Jayabaya is said to have vanished, having achieved *moksa* or 'liberation', and leaving no mortal body behind.

These and many other leading politicians also have visited spiritual leaders whose knowledge of prophecy is profound, though they may not bother to study texts. Rather, their knowledge is based on having direct access to the world of spirit (*alam gaib*), that is, to the same source from which Jayabaya drew his knowledge in the first place. Indeed, these contemporary Javanese masters of the spirit world are charged not only with interpreting but also with implementing the prophecy, and are believed to have the spiritual power to decide who will become the next president. Here the prediction of the future becomes inseparable from the making of the future because the personal will of such persons is in alignment with the divine intent (*karsa*) of the macrocosm. Whatsoever such a spiritual master utters is therefore expected to become true, whether it be a curse or a blessing.

Megawati and Gus Dur, for example, were given ‘the power to rule’ Indonesia (*wahyu raja*) by one of the most influential of these leaders at a sacred site on a beach in Gunung Kidul, and built monuments at this site to show their gratitude after their subsequent election<sup>2</sup>. The current president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, is also no stranger to this world, but I am not prepared to elaborate on this while he is still in office.

Herein we see prophecy manifested as part of a living, contemporary tradition and active political process (see also Quinn 2009). In principle, this is made possible by a still popular Javanese cosmology that acknowledges the spirit world, and in practice, the process relies on consultation between political figures at all levels and people who are reputed to be expert mystical practitioners. It is therefore important here to understand what Java’s spiritual experts are capable of. It is also impossible to appreciate this if we confine ourselves to conventional forms of understanding, which include conventional social science. Thus, all I can do here is provide some of the core elements of Javanese mystics’ ‘beliefs’, even though in their own view belief has absolutely nothing to do with it.

Prophecy cannot be separated from Java’s ancient and profound mystical tradition, whose proponents seek direct access to the truth through rigorous spiritual practices. These practices cultivate a capacity for the conscious exercise of “intent” (*karsa*), a human faculty that differs from language-based reasoning and produces a form of awareness spanning up to eleven dimensions rather than the usual three dimensions of human language-based consciousness. From the perspective of higher forms of consciousness the future can be apprehended because time, the fourth dimension, forms a “curve” rather than a straight line. Time is said to curve and ultimately to form a dynamic “circle” from the eternity-based perspective of awareness in the fifth dimension, a dimension that reveals the pulse-like nature of a cosmos between being and emptiness (*alam awang uwung*, ‘the realm that is empty and yet full’), just like the roundness of three-dimensional space can only be recognised from the higher perspective of ordinary time-bound consciousness. One could say that higher dimensions reveal ever more profound and near unimaginable degrees of ‘roundness’, or integration. In relation to the fourth dimension, “intent” allows a direct encounter with the real that is beyond time and yet includes it, leading to an experience of a kind of hyper-spherical reality<sup>3</sup>. The capacity to prophesise thus provides one kind of evidence to show that the inner Self (*sukma*) has awoken and achieved mastery of intent. Note that it is not for a ‘person’ (*orang*) to achieve mastery of divine powers, rather it is the divine that achieves mastery over the finite personality and manifests itself in this way, with the conscious permission and participation of the person concerned. Incidentally, I am here breaking with Javanese tradition, according to which it is quite futile to try and put such experiences into mere words except in a context of practical instruction.

---

<sup>2</sup> The spiritual leader in question has expressed his wish not to be named for the time being, due to concerns that he may suffer persecution or risk the enmity of competitors, particularly among Muslim leaders.

<sup>3</sup> The use herein of terms such as ‘curve’, ‘roundness’ or ‘sphere’ is metaphorical.

## ***On the science of prophecy and the mythology of science***

The political use of prophecies in Java is interesting as a social practice that has few parallels in contemporary Western societies. I say few rather than none, because there are notable exceptions, such as the prophecies of Fatima, which have had an enormous political impact, inspiring covert political initiatives in Poland and beyond, that contributed to the fall of the Soviet empire and the end of the Cold War. Another pertinent example is the biblical prophecy of Armageddon and the second coming of Christ, which is very important to premillennial dispensationalists and Christian Zionists in the USA. The latter have had significant influence on the US government and its policies, especially under Presidents Carter and G.W. Bush. For example, they have lent much support to the Israeli occupation because presumably one of the preconditions for the second coming is that Jerusalem be returned to the Jews (in its entirety, according to their interpretation).

In their everyday life as well, many people in the West still turn to astrology and other esoteric systems of understanding for personal guidance and to predict the future, because science is seen as rather unhelpful in this regard. In general, however, since the Renaissance modern science has provided the dominant model of truth in Western society with regard to the natural world, while an equally dominant and important socio-political model of human relations has been provided by the modernist Protestant ethos of capitalism, as described in the classic work of Max Weber (1958[1904]). Gradually, science has provided us with such a powerful description of the world as it (supposedly) really is, that any other idea anyone may have about the nature of reality is immediately ridiculed and dismissed as a false proposition; as a mere belief. This conservative attitude fails to give credit to the fact that, precisely because the prophetic imagination can motivate us to act in accordance with scientifically 'false' claims about the future, it helps us to change the world and the future in the process. As Castoriadis (1998) has observed, the imaginary is as important as our awareness of the manifestly real when it comes to providing motivation for action and social change.

What is held to be 'real' in contemporary late modern society, following Baudrillard's (2005), is in fact no more than an imagined, simulated form of reality that has fossilised into what he calls the 'hyper-real'. To the extent that our reality is made to appear to us as a natural state of affairs, rather than being recognized as a human creation based on imaginative human actions in the past, we are no longer free to re-imagine and recreate reality. Apart from the scepticism bequeathed upon us by neo-Newtonian scientific conservatism, we find it difficult to question and challenge the experience of the hyper-real through new, active imaginings because this is a heavily mediated experience. As our attention is drawn increasingly into a mediated and virtual reality over which we have little creative control, the imagination is colonised by vested interests. At the same time, we are constantly distracted by the media from the material conditions of modern life, even in the face of much evidence of an impending environmental disaster. We have become entrapped in the iron cage of a totalising myth that still wears the mask of descriptive realism but is no longer scientific in the genuine explorative sense, and is further entrapped by the distractions of a medi-

ated social imaginary that discourages us from creatively imagining millenarian future realities.<sup>4</sup>

In Javanese prophecy, the modern condition is depicted as a reversal of the natural order of things and as a state of madness. Indeed, the inability to recognize our human capacity for envisaging and creating a new reality, a future, is noted in the texts as a key indicator that we now live in a *kali yuga* or 'dark age', the low point in the spiral of time. Here despondency and fatalism are the norm, and those who ask questions and maintain virtue are scorned or persecuted. Expert interpreters of the prophecy texts lament that worldly greed, and the shallow intellectualism that cleverly serves its ends, have usurped the throne that rightly belongs to the inner Self (*sukma sejati*) which alone is capable of experiencing truth, because it is truth. From this inner-worldly perspective, the real *ratu adil* or saviour is none other than the *sukma sejati* returned to its throne, and when this occurs a golden age of spiritual insight commences for the individual concerned. If this kind of awareness is more widely cultivated, on a societal scale, then it becomes a golden age in the exoteric, socio-political sense, emulating the conditions that prevailed during the reign of King Jayabaya. Unlike the millenarianism of Marxism, this eschatological model does not separate individual spirituality and socio-political advancement because the former is considered a prerequisite for the latter.

The prophecy texts of Java present a rational argument to their readers. Like scientific theories, they too aspire to be descriptive of reality. Indeed, the content of the texts – if we assume the temporal perspective of their eighteenth-century authors – consists of approximately ninety percent historical description and ten percent future prediction. This is not dissimilar from the scientific method, whereby rational predictions of future events are also deemed possible. Scientific prediction is based on observation of a sample set of past events, on determining patterns of recurrence in these events, and defining these patterns mathematically. In short, scientific predictions rely on the formulation of natural laws or, at least, where that is impossible, on the statistical description of observable historical patterns. Similarly, the prophecy texts strive to establish a historical pattern. Observing the fluctuations of the political fate of Java, the prophecy texts note alternations between righteous and tyrannical governments, and also point to a second, more long term pattern or trend whereby the low points in these short cycles increase in depth and become more frequent. This pattern is predicted to continue into the future, leading to a gradual decline of civilization and a global cataclysm. This cataclysm is predicted to occur in the year 2100. Before the reader breathes a sigh of relief, because the bitter end appears to be scheduled for a future moment that lies beyond our life-span, let me hasten to add that the meaning of this date is uncertain and disputed. To begin with, several different calendars are used in Java. The difficulty lies in pinpointing where exactly the present moment is described in the text. Most contemporary expert interpreters of the prophecy say that a terrible cataclysm – in the form of a massive natural disaster - will occur very soon.

---

<sup>4</sup> An example is the captivation of tens of millions of young adults, teenagers and children by mediated imaginary experiences in on-line interactive computer game worlds such as 'Call of Duty'. The players are provided with the opportunity to make decisions within a virtual reality, which they share with other 'real' players as well as computer generated figures. But their imagination is not required to become creative. Rather, the rules of engagements and the imagery are all provided for them, and lead the players into a world wherein brutality is normalised. Not even the international rules of warfare are enforced in this apocalyptic scenario. Unthinking violence towards anyone designated from above as enemies, including civilians, and self-interested loyalty to one's own horde of fighters appear to be the only principles. The popularity of this game is a mark of how strong the apocalyptic archetype has become in the collective unconscious of late modern society, and what kind of future we are being prepared for.



Current debates about climate change show, however, that we have not abandoned the art of prediction and that we cannot afford to do so, or even to restrict our foresight to four-year election cycles. Many a scientist would scoff at this and say that the future cannot be predicted with any certainty, or at least not far in advance. The main obstacles are indeterminacy and complexity.

Predicting the future of humanity is a bit like trying to beat the bank in playing roulette. Gamblers reject the notion of indeterminacy and fancy they can predict what numbers will come up next on the basis of observing past results. Generally they are defeated by the limits of memory and processing power, and because the time span over which an apparently random number series can be observed may be too short to observe any regularities operating on very long cycles. Nevertheless, casinos acknowledge that some punters do have uncanny winning streaks, to the extent that they regularly choose to evict such people.

So what do we make of the Javanese prophecies in the light of all this? Is it possible to know the future? What and where is the future anyway? The capacity of the mind, of rational, language-based thought, is so limited that the future as a whole would definitely seem inaccessible, even to a causal determinist, because the sheer complexity of the cosmos makes it impossible to take full account of all causes. The calculator would need to be as large as the cosmos itself. Nevertheless, recent scientific research in neuropsychology has shown that human beings do have an unconscious holistic intelligence that far surpasses their faculty of conscious analytical reasoning, and is able to deal with complexity more effectively. In one experiment, subjects who were distracted from thinking about a complex problem came up with more accurate solutions than others who were encouraged to analyse the information provided (Association for Psychological Science 2008). From a *kejawen* perspective, this non-analytical intelligence is deemed to belong to the cosmos as a whole. A person, who knows themselves to be deeply connected to, and at one with, all existence is thus privy to a knowledge that may well seem supernatural to others. The basic reason why the future is knowable in this way, they say, is because linear time is an illusion, and every moment and every possibility is equal and exists simultaneously and contiguously from the perspective of an eternal and infinite divine reality.

This kind of hyper-dimensional model of reality is not entirely at odds with post-Newtonian scientific theory, and much contemporary spiritual literature has recognised these parallels. The difference is that even the scientists concerned usually do not “know” that kind of science to be true at a level of direct somatic experience, the way Javanese spiritual practitioners know it. Scientists only “believe” higher dimensions to be true on the basis of indirect evidence, and such belief is rejected within the spiritual tradition of Java. Scientists and those who hire them certainly can make practical, instrumental use of such advanced scientific cosmologies, as the abuse of Einstein’s and Oppenheimer’s work for the production of nuclear bombs has famously illustrated. Few people in the scientific or wider community, however, allow such advanced cosmological insights to improve their self-understanding as human beings. The critique of some Javanese spiritual masters is, therefore, that we must stop merely “believing” in science and bring discoveries to bear on our direct experience of life. This, they claim, will lead us to the same conclusions about time and prophecy and related matters that they themselves have reached through their science of the spirit.



Regardless of whether we are willing to pay heed to this kind of argument or not, there is a more mundane, phenomenological sense in which the power of prophecy is only too 'real'. In our rational, scientific worldview there may be little room left for presumably "irrational" spiritual worldviews such as the one the Jayabaya prophecies rely on. But despite their apparent irrationality, or because of it, prophecies may produce positive outcomes in human terms insofar as they dare to posit a future which is based on values and ideals rather than observed facts. It seems that we in the West find it difficult to give ourselves permission to imagine and thus produce a world in our own image, to our own human liking and commensurate with our own real needs. That is because the world is now altogether outside us, and only apprehensible - through our senses and scientific devices - in the mental mirror of a transcendental subject or Ego. In the world of Javanese prophecy, by contrast, the subject knows the world because it is the world; it knows from the position of an immanent subject who is inseparable from the greater subject of the universe and in whom the spirit of the entire universe resonates. This is a formless kind of knowing, without separation and hence without information.

Human aims such as creating happiness, beauty or goodness, are not necessarily well served by forms of rationality based on a transcendental subject, and certainly not by the instrumentalised rationality of capitalist modernity, wherein the subject views everyone and everything as a mere object and life's purpose as a fool's quest to reunite with the object through consumption. Seen from this perspective, our modern worldview contains a great deal of irrationality and fetishism. It may seem that a commitment to scientific realism will ensure that our worldview is sound and objective. However, such realism can cause us to lose sight of the deeper truth that - as Clifford Geertz (1973) famously observed - worldviews are 'models for' (achieving goals), not just 'models of' (reality). For example, if we think that inequality is simply a natural consequence of market competition then the way the capitalist system operates at present may appear to be the only way it could operate. Such pseudo-realism truly constitutes a mythologising of reality, and is due to a failure to recognise how we choose to make things real, how we produce and reproduce them.

The ideal political economy envisaged in Javanese prophecies is rather different. It is essentially based on a spiritual model of righteous government, whereby the a government's success, and of the virtue of those at the top of the hierarchy, kings and presidents alike, can be measured by the extent to which the wong *cilik*, the 'little people', the man and woman on the street, are able to live in peace and prosperity. Jayabaya's reign is reputed as a period where such conditions prevailed, because he was an enlightened, spiritual ruler, and hence in tune with the needs of the many. The prophecies thus envisage the possibility of a new golden age, when once again the forces of light will rule supreme on earth, though it may be preceded by a time of great turmoil. No more than a beautiful fanciful dream, some may say. But woe is us, if we do not dare to dream.

Of course, the dominant late modern discourse of instrumental rationality is not uncontested in the West, nor is Indonesia removed from its influence. If I have somewhat dramatised the differences it is only for the sake of illustration. Nevertheless, the degree to which in Indonesia the world of spirit is acknowledged in everyday life, and even in national politics, is truly remarkable. Nowhere is this attitude more

evident than in the great importance the Indonesian people and national elite alike attribute to the prophecies of Jayabaya and Sabdapalon.

## **References**

Association for Psychological Science, 2008. Press Release. [http://www.eurekalert.org/pub\\_releases/2008-09/afps-ehd093008.php](http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2008-09/afps-ehd093008.php)

Baudrillard, Jean 2005. *The Intelligence of Evil or The Lucidity Pact*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.

Castoriadis C. 1998. *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. (Trans.: Kathleen Blamey). MIT Press. Cambridge.

Florida, Nancy (1995). *Writing the Past, Inscribing the Future: History as Prophecy in Colonial Java*. Durham (NC). Duke University Press.

Geertz, Clifford 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.

Kartodirdjo, Sartono (1970). *Religious Movement in Java in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Jogjakarta: Universitas Gadjah Mada.

Quinn, George (2009) National Legitimacy through a Regional Prism. In Sakai, M., Banks, G. & J.H. Walker (eds), *Politics of the Periphery: Social and geographical perspectives*. Singapore: NUS Press.

Suwandi, Raharjo (2000) *A Quest for Justice: The millenary aspirations of a contemporary Javanese Wali*. Verhandelingen 182. Leiden: KITLV Press.

Weber, Max 1958. *The Protestant Work Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: T. Parsons. First published in German in 1904.

# The end of the world at the end of the earth: Retrospective eschatology on Rapanui (Easter Island)<sup>1</sup>

*Grant McCall  
University of Sydney*

## ***Abstract***

There are three stories about the end of the world as the Rapanui knew it, one from foundation myth, another from long ago and the LAST more recent.

Just as it was the dream of Haumaka that showed the way to the first inhabitants of Rapanui, perhaps two thousand years ago, so it was the dream of Hakarevareva a te niu that foretold the end. Hakarevareva was a seer/priest like Haumaka and one morning he excitedly told his fellow islanders that large houses, strange people and outlandish animals would come to Rapanui and that their way of life would change forever. People who remember and tell this story say that Hakarevareva saw the coming of Europeans with their buildings and different animals in the 19th century, although it was to be about 142 years after the first contact before one of those odd visitors would come to stay, bringing his peculiar foreign ways that overwhelmed the comfortable Rapanui ones.

The other story about the end comes from 1965 and was not a prediction, but many people think a statement of fact. The skull of Hotu Matu'a, the founding culture hero who turned voyaging Polynesians into Rapanui had been kept in a secret place in his adopted homeland. It gave the Islanders the mana of protection, even ameliorating the effects of the resident outsiders. However, in 1964, a French author and adventurer persuaded three Rapanui to let him borrow that skull. When the adventurer departed and became the most widely published French writer about the island, so departed the mana of the place. People began to die young, forsake their language and what had been Rapanui for so long began to slip away. Foreign visitors and Rapanui who live in foreign parts alike have been sent to find the skull which if it returns to Rapanui will restore the old order OF peace and harmony.

The title? Apart from Rapanui, Easter Island also is known as Tepito o Tehenua, which many non-Rapanui translate as "the navel of the earth". Just as many Rapanui use Polynesian polysemy and render the translation as "the end of the earth".

**Keywords:** Rapanui, Easter Island, Pacific Islands, Ritual, Godelier

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented first at the University of Sydney Department of Anthropology two day symposium "Anthropology and the End of Worlds", 25-26 March 2010.

## **Introduction**

In the last few years, Maurice Godelier (2003; 2004; 2007; 2008; 2010b) has been making his way through what for him are major concepts in the social sciences, defining what he means by them and how he thinks they might be improved in current practice. Most recently, he (Godelier 2010a) proposes an examination of the concepts of ‘Community’, ‘Society’ and ‘Culture’, which the sub-title of his paper calls ‘three keys to understanding today’s conflict identities’.

My purpose is to draw some conclusions from Godelier’s Durkheimian approach at the end of this paper that I think help me to understand Rapanui views of the end of the world from where they stand, as they say, at the end of the world. I will discuss three ends of the Rapanui world that people have discussed with me over the years on Rapanui:

- The foundation of the place through the vision of *Haumaka*;
- The foundation of the new Rapanui through the vision of *Hakarevareva ‘a Te Niu* (herein after, *Hakarevareva*);
- The foundation of today’s Rapanui through the theft of a prized skull.

This paper has been long developing since I first was told of *Hakarevareva*’s vision in the past of the future of his Easter Island, which the people of that place call *Rapanui*; they also call themselves and their language *Rapanui*, although that designation can be documented to about 1862-1863 when fellow Polynesians enquired of those Islanders their origin.<sup>2</sup>

The people of Rapa, in the Austral group, who sometimes called their place ‘*Rapaiti*’ had in their origin story their ancient homeland as ‘*Rapanui*’, the former meaning little Rapa and the latter big Rapa. As the people of Rapa and their neighbours tried to understand where the Easter Islanders they met derived, they thought it might be the ancestral homeland of the people of Rapa. So, *Rapanui* came into being, a mythical land reborn as a remote, nostalgic and far away place.<sup>3</sup> *Rapanui* have an origin story as well. They believe they came from *Maraerenga*, a distant and beautiful (*‘renga’*) place where they lived since the origin of everything. One day, the ariki of *Maraerenga*, *Hotu Matu’a*, consulted his seer or priest, called *Haumaka*. *Haumaka* had a dream of a distant place, no where as pleasant as *Maraerenga*, but capable of supporting life. *Haumaka* visited that island, flying over the topography, naming some places, telling *Hotu Matu’a* about it on his return. Now, ancestral *Maraerenga* came to be swamped shortly after that. The swamping could have been water or a defeat in battle, depending on the source of the tradition in the literature. Most

---

<sup>2</sup> ‘Easter Island’ derives from the first documented European visit to the place in 1722, sighted on Easter Sunday, so the name. ‘*Rapanui*’ is explained above. In spelling that toponym, Chilean writers render it ‘*Rapa Nui*’; *Rapanui* themselves write it ‘*Rapanui*’, in common with unsyllabified place names in the rest of Oceania. I follow the *Rapanui* (and more Oceanic) rendering.

<sup>3</sup> The people of *Rapaiti* met the people of *Rapanui* in the course of the 1861-2 slave trade, originating in Peru, but touching many Pacific island places. See McCall (1976; Maude 1981)

of my sources said it was a battle. In the face of the conqueror, Hotu Matu'a and his followers were obliged to leave Maraerenga and with Haumaka's aid, to find their new home. As they voyaged, three men/spirits were sent ahead to explore the place. They too moved over the place and one of them became caught in the rocks at one point and died there. The other two knew that Hotu Matu'a and his followers were arriving and went to the place today called 'Orongo', the call, a promontory looking to the southeast. As the flotilla of refugees from Maraerenga were sailing towards them, one of the men picked up a handful of earth and shouted to Hotu Matu'a and his followers, '*Kainga kino*', useless land, meaning that their new sub-tropical home was not as fertile as Maraerenga. So, the foundation of what became Rapanui today was in disappointment and loss, a perspective some Rapanui consider ruefully from time to time when they contemplate their sub-tropical and rocky island home, particularly as it is today after over a century of sheep ranching.

Archaeologists differ in the dating, but not the sequence of the island's history (see Hunt and Lipo 2008; Orliac and Orliac 2008). I favour a fourth century date for foundation (McCall 1979), giving the Rapanui about a thousand years to develop their unique megalithic art and architecture, that came to an end in the, most researchers agree fourteen century (cf Orliac & Orliac 2008).

Without going into details, the next landmark is the vision or dream (*moevarua*) of Hakarevareva. Hakarevareva was a seer and a priest, like Haumaka, and in the post-megalithic phase of Rapanui history, he would have had daily duties for his Ariki as well as taking part in the annual climate based island-wide ceremonial that took place at Orongo (same place as the earlier first arrival announcement noted above).<sup>4</sup> The purpose of the more than a month long Orongo ceremonial was to select through ordeal the Arikimau, or overall ruler of the entire island. According to one count, there were 243 Orongo (McCall 1994). The precise number of times the Orongo took place is less important than the fact that the ceremonial was marked over a considerable period of time. Hakarevareva had a vision of the future of the island that would spell the end of the life as everyone knew it. All that was familiar would disappear and it would be replaced by people much like the Rapanui but who behaved in extraordinary ways and had with them extraordinary things. They brought square houses to Rapanui; they wore different clothing than the Rapanui, over their entire body; they had odd and unknown animals with them, including one large one on which they would ride, to move about the island.<sup>5</sup> These things were not particularly terrifying, but they were different and all would be changed because of their arrival.

When Hakarevareva had his vision was not clear to my informants. As St Stephen of Byzantium said, 'Myth is something that never was, but always is'. It could have been before the Dutch captain Jakob Rog-

---

<sup>4</sup> I write in short hand 'climate based'. Without going into detail, the Orongo took place at the beginning of the austral spring. It commenced when the manutara – Sooty Tern (*Onychoprion fuscatus*) – came to Rapanui in late August or September, to lay its eggs on a couple of small offshore islands. The arrival of the familiar bird signaled the end of the island's harsh, sub-tropical winter.

<sup>5</sup> The story teller makes it clear that this is a horse, called in Rapanui *Hoi*: they are plentiful on the island today and used for transporting those who do not own motorized vehicles (or who vehicles no longer function or are too expensive to run)

geveen arrived on Easter Sunday 1722. Or it could have been after when Rapanui used to build earth mounds in the shape of ships (*miro o'one*) and practice manipulating their dealings with outsiders. On those *miro o'one*, Rapanui would play both the visitor and local roles; they were entertainments as well as ways of practicing exchange techniques with the outsiders, I was told. They were not serious affairs and often involved humour, such as successfully duping the visitor into accepting a less than satisfactory exchange. The *miro o'one* was a public entertainment that probably was island based since there are few of these identified in the archaeology of the island. Like all public entertainment, it builds solidarity and reference points for people to relate to one another. Hakarevareva's vision must have been before 1864, though, for that was the year when a lone missionary Lay Brother became the first outsider to live on Rapanui and to bring the things Hakarevareva had predicted, if for the horses that arrived with the second missionary landing in 1866.

The name 'Hakarevareva' is in my genealogies in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, but people used to repeat the names of well-known and venerated people, so that does not fix the seer and prophet in any time: that probably is appropriate for such an influential exceptional personage.

Between 1722 and 1862, the latter being the date of decimating and savage slave raids (from Peru) on Easter Island, there were over one hundred ships that called for various purposes, mainly exploration and trade (McCall 1976; Maude 1981). When people asked the local name of Easter Island, they were given different ones. Cook experienced this and was aware that Polynesians often did not have a name for the entire island, but for places on it. So, the marvellous map of ca 5000 places made by Tupaia in collaboration with Banks and Cook, was not of 5000 islands, but destinations to which someone might want to sail (Druett 2010; Lewthwait 1970; Salmond 2008).

Amongst the names told by the locals to various foreign visitors to Easter Island was *Tepito o tehenua*. Sometimes, just '*Tepito*'. People usually translate '*Tepito o tehenua*' as 'the navel of the earth'; indeed, there are books about Rapanui with that title in their respective languages. But '*Tepito*' can mean also the end or the tip, so the translation as some Rapanui wryly remark today, can mean 'the end of the earth' as it is in my title: the most extreme and the most remote place at the end of the earth. The place from which one can go no farther.

There is some justification for that 'end' designation as Rapanui is the world's most remote inhabited place, at 149 on the United Nations scale of island remoteness: 149 is the most isolated on the scale and that is Rapanui.<sup>6</sup> After the slave raids mentioned above and the arrival of Catholic priests from the French 'Sacred Hearts' or 'Picpus' Order in 1866, there was more contact with France, more inquisitive expeditions. In 1888, a South American country, Chile, to fulfil its self-proclaimed destiny as the inheritor of Spain's Pacific hegemony, needed a colony and the only one remaining was Isla de Pascua, as they called it. So, after asking France if it was OK to make the claim, they did so in the form of Captain Policarpo Toro Hur-

---

<sup>6</sup> The URL for the Rapanui entry in this very useful and complete database is: <http://islands.unep.ch/IXE.htm#271/>



tado, who promptly installed his brother (an army officer) as the manager of the sheep ranch on the island. Eventually, Isla de Pascua became a large sheep ranch, but instead of putting the animal livestock (sheep, cattle and pigs) in pens, they put a fence around the Islanders, forbidding them to travel even to parts of their own island, let alone anywhere else. All that changed in 1966 when Isla de Pascua became an incorporated territory of Chile and the Islanders full citizens. After that, until the present day, the ‘Pascuences’<sup>7</sup>, as Chilean writers often refer to the Rapanui, developed autonomously an industry they had been practicing with some success: the reception of visitors, or tourism, which brings about 70,000 people to the place annually for a resident indigenous population of less than 4,000.<sup>8</sup>

But I have left behind the last ‘end of the world’ and that took place in 1966 when Rapanui’s isolation from the rest of the planet ceased; when Islanders could travel; when many more outsiders came to reside on the place; when everything did change with 24 hour television, over a hundred taxis, hundreds of cars, motorbikes and trucks, telephones (fixed line and mobile), broadband wireless internet and plastic packaging. There even is a Hummer painted black with frosted windows getting about the place, owned by an itinerant wealthy Frenchman who claims to be a gypsy. What brought about that dramatic series of changes? According to many of my (not always older) informants, it was the loss of the skull of Hotu Matu’a that is responsible. Remember him? He was the Rapanui culture hero who led the foundation fleet and whilst most of his body went back to Maraerenga when he died, his skull remained in a secret place on Rapanui, guarded by trusted Islanders, from father to son and so on. Most people never had seen the skull. It never was brought out in public or otherwise on display. It was a secret that everyone knew, but only a couple of people knew the location of the sequestered relic.<sup>9</sup> There was no ceremonial or time of the year when the skull might be shown. The guardians may or may not have visited it, together or alone: it was hidden from view, but not consciousness. Well, in 1964, a French adventurer, born in Tahiti, he said, Francis Mazière<sup>10</sup> came to Rapanui, to Tepito o tehenua to make a documentary, write a few books, including a children’s one, and acquire artefacts for sale in his native France. He did all those things, including his book, copied almost entirely from a rare 1948 Chilean published one (Englert 1948). Mazière (1968)’s book in many languages and editions, remaining a best seller and often is the only title that French visitors know when they come to the island (See McCall 1995).<sup>11</sup> With his six months residence and his Tahitian wife, Mazière became intimate with many Rapanui families. He was in sympathy with the Islander’s plight, and publicised on many occasions to Chile’s embarrassment that government’s ill treatment of the Islanders. Amongst many items he acquired during his sojourn, were some skeletons from caves and other burial places, as well as commissioning a number of carvings that he sold as genuine ancient pieces. Near the end of his stay, he found out

---

**7** From the Spanish Isla de Pascua; to Pascuence for some who is from that place.

**8** I have discussed all this in detail elsewhere (McCall 2008).

**9** Some few people have ventured to ask me if I think the skull ever really did exist as only the guardians knew its location.

**10** According to the Bibliothèque Nationale website entry for one of his books (Mazière 1984) Mazière was born in 1924 and died in 1994 <http://catalogue.bnf.fr>.

**11** Mazière himself cultivated an image of the urbane scientist and defender of the weak. French speakers can appreciate his public persona by looking at a 37 minute interview made for French television, broadcast on 14 October 1965 and available for viewing at the website of the Institut national de l’audiovisuel <http://www.ina.fr>. The interviewer was Pierre Sabbagh, a media personality of the day and host of the program, ‘Le magazine des explorateurs (The Explorer’s Magazine)’.



about the skull, my informants said, of Hotu Matu'a and discovered to his pleasure that amongst the families he knew were the guardians of this culturally important artefact. The Frenchman asked to see the skull, with its elaborate carvings and large size. There were three men involved, but only one of them was the guardian. Mazière convinced his two friends to bring the Hotu Matu'a skull to him, which they did. Furthermore, he asked to borrow the skull and they let him take the precious object away. Some versions of the story have them taking clothing, even alcohol, at the time of the hand over. The skull of Hotu Matu'a never returned to the island and neither did Mazière. The two Mazière confederates led poor and diseased lives after that, they both told me separately: they firmly believed that they had been cursed. The actual guardian never had children and finished his days wandering on a hill side, where he died confused in a state of senile dementia. The guardian had told me some years before his sad death that he feared he would lose his mind for his transgression with the skull.

During my fieldwork from 1972 to 1974 and, again, from 1985 to 1986, I was begged to find Francis Mazière and to urge him, even force him, to return the precious skull: he told me in his flat in Paris in the 16th arrondissement in July 1986 that he knew nothing of the skull or the photograph in his book of it. Oh! The photograph, he corrected, yes, he sold that skull to a certain professor at the university medical school in Antwerp; which professor did not exist and which school amazingly, never had heard of Francis Mazière.

Since my 2001-2001 visit to and research on the island, a number of Rapanui and their supporters have tried to trace the skull that will restore Rapanui to its happy pre-1966 state and cure all the ills found there now such as the disappearance of the language, the large number of Chilean émigrés who marry Rapanui, the decline in respect by the young for the old, the growing use of cannabis (unless it is for old people to control their pain, of course), drunkenness, loud television and loud vehicles, just to mention a few things. These ills and problems are common Islander perceptions voiced in conversations amongst Rapanui and appear from time to time in journalistic reports about the place.

I return to Godelier, who argues that it is through ritual that community, culture and society are created, hence 'identity'. The common Rapanui belief in the skull gives the believing Rapanui local agency in the great changes that have taken place; to place them in an understanding with, even an influence on, modernity. It was a Rapanui artefact that had mighty power and when that Rapanui artefact was taken away, disaster befell the island and its people. It was not the coming of outsider influences, such as the American Air Force base on the island from 1966 to 1970 or so; it was not a change in Chilean policy towards the place. No, it was the skull, with the power of the ancestors that brought about the change by being stolen.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Whilst looking at the website for the Banaban people, who live mostly on Rabi Island, Fiji, I came across a similar skull stealing to explain changes on their place. In this case, it seems an archaeologist removed Teimanaia's from Te Aka village on Banaba. The website quotes: '...many Banabans believe that only when Teimanaia's skull is returned to its rightful place will their [Banaban] prosperity return' ([http://www.banaban.com/contents/en-us/d90\\_search-teimanaia-skull.html](http://www.banaban.com/contents/en-us/d90_search-teimanaia-skull.html)). Given at least this story of an only distantly related people, a belief in the power of a skull to protect a people and their island would seem to be autochthonous and not deriving from fetishised Christian relics and their imagery, as suggested by one reviewer of this paper.

People also comment that they believe that Mazière suffered misfortunes of his own owing to the theft. They alleged that he suffered poor health and that his Tahitian wife had divorced him. Again, the power of Rapanui mana has its ability to do harm to the foreign miscreant and violator of sacred things, even if few people ever had viewed the object. They knew it was big – as the skull of any culture hero would be – and they knew that it had elaborate carvings on it. Again, as one would expect of such a sacred and powerful object. The belief in the skull does not involve a visible or specific ritual as such, but the professing of a belief, the recounting of the story. The ritual is in the story telling and, of course, for those who wish to participate in the myth, agreeing to the tale. I argue that myth is story and that telling (and listening to) the symbolic story is its ritual, building society, as Godelier concluded. The dealing with the superior power of the outsider, the Whiteman/Chilean, is done through a Rapanui cosmology or belief system in the power of the skull over the land and over people, even foreign ones. A number of indigenous cultures have stories about how their ancestors foresaw the changes that were going to take place; the Aztecs, for example, as told to me by Susan Drucker-Brown (1978) at Cambridge in 1986. She assured me that there were other examples that probably would be worthwhile following up one day: indigenous prophets that foresaw the invasion of their lands through the colonial enterprise.

By incorporating catastrophic or at least disturbing changes into the Rapanui power orbit and telling and believing stories about such things, people take charge of their destiny at the same time as they stamp themselves on history as a community and a culture; as an identity with a society: so the Rapanui have done with their stolen skull and its salience to the great changes over the last half-century.

Through ritual, society, culture and community are created, Godelier (2010) writes and I agree. I argue that accepting and believing in a myth – in Malinowski (1992)'s sense as a justification for a current state of affairs such as the end of the known world, as the Rapanui have done from their island situated at the end of the world, has created them as a society, given them the organisational ability of a community and the comfort of a heretofore common culture and ontology. Myth is demonstrated amongst a community by being enacted as ritual, much in the way that Lévi-Strauss (1974) saw the relationship between these two universal features of human society to promote and bolster ontological security.

As Godelier (2010:10) ends his account reflecting on his findings for the large scale society in which we live, I will do something like that. Similarly for those in modern society, there is a belief in an apocalypse, mentioned as 'global warming' by the keynote speaker at this conference, Michael Taussig. We create our community of believers, our society of actors and our culture of conviction by accepting that is the fate we have unless we change our ways by frugal living, careful shepherding of resources and, most publically, not using plastic bags. To demonstrate our adherence to those beliefs, we can install a photovoltaic system on our roof tops (thousands), put in rainwater tanks in our gardens (hundreds) or get a 'save the planet' sackcloth of humility bag from Coles, a major supermarket chain in Australia (one dollar). I display my adherence to our European developed world, Australian dialect, end of the world vision from the seers whose visions we respect and agree to abide. I hope that I can count on all of you in my audience to do the same

by buying your 'save the planet' shopping bag and carrying it with you on important occasions to demonstrate conclusively your adherence to a philosophy of caretaking our planet.

Society making ritual is in everyday life and it demonstrates that we are of the group, whether shopping bag or ritual story, told by many, to explain all.



<http://juniorlandcarechallenge.com/Coles/Coles.htm>

## ***References***

- Drucker-Brown, Susan. 1978. The myth of foresight: Case studies from Mexico and northern Ghana compared. *Cambridge Anthropology* 4(3): 58-87.
- Druett, Joan. 2010. *Tupaia. Captain Cook's Polynesian Navigator*. New York, Praeger.
- Englert, Padre Sebastian. 1948. *La tierra de Hotu Matu'a*. Santiago de Chile, Padre Las Casas.
- Godelier, Maurice. 2003. What is a sexual act? *Anthropological Theory* 3(2): 179-198.
- Godelier, Maurice. 2004. *Métamorphoses de la parenté*. Paris, Fayard.
- Godelier, Maurice. 2007. *Au fondement des sociétés humaines: Ce que nous apprend l'anthropologie*. Paris, Albin Michel.
- Godelier, Maurice. 2008. *L'énigme du don*. Paris, Flammarion.
- Godelier, Maurice. 2010a. Community, society, culture: Three keys to understanding today's conflicted identities. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16(1): 1-11.
- Godelier, Maurice. 2010b. *Les tribus dans l'Histoire et face aux Etats*. Paris, CNRS.
- Hunt, T. L. & C. P. Lipo. 2008. Evidence for a shorter chronology on Rapa Nui (Easter Island). *Journal of Island and Coastal Archaeology* 3: 140-148.
- Hunt, T. L. & C. P. Lipo. 2009. Ecological catastrophe, collapse and the myth of 'ecocide on Rapa Nui (Easter

Island). In P. A. McAnany and N Yoffee (eds), *Questioning collapse. Human resilience, ecological vulnerability and the aftermath of empire*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. Pp. 21-44.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1974. The structural study of myth. In Thomas Sebeok (ed), *Myth: A Symposium*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press. Pp. 81-106.

Lewthwaite, Gordon R. 1970. "The puzzle of Tupaia's map". *New Zealand Geographer* 26(1): 1-19.

Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1992. *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays. Prospect Heights, Waveland Press*.

Maude, H. E. 1981. *Slavers in paradise. The Peruvian slave trade in Polynesia, 1862-1864*. Palo Alto, Stanford University Press.

Mazière, Francis. 1968. *Fantastique île de Pâques*. Paris, le Livre de poche.

Mazière, Francis. 1984. *Du Sinai à la Mer morte: de Moïse à Jésus*. Published by the author. <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/servlet/RechercheEquation?TexteCollection=HGARSTUVWXYZ1DIECBMJNQLOKP&TexteTypeDoc=DESNFPIBTMCJOV&Equation=IDP%3Dcb347615151&host=catalogue>

McCall, Grant. 1976. European impact on Easter Island. Response, recruitment and the Polynesian experience in Peru. *Journal of Pacific History* 11(2): 90–105.

McCall, Grant. 1979. Kinship and environment on Easter Island. Some observations and speculations. *Mankind* 12(2): 119–137.

McCall, Grant. 1994. *Rapanui. Tradition and Survival on Easter Island*. Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, & Honolulu: The University Press of Hawai'i.

McCall, Grant. 1995. French images of Rapanui (Easter Island). *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 104 (2): 181–194.

McCall, Grant. 2008. "Another (unintended) legacy of Captain Cook? The evolution of Rapanui (Easter Island) tourism". In John Connell & Barbara Rugendyke (eds), *Tourism at the grassroots: Villagers and visitors in the Asia Pacific*. London, Routledge. Pp. 41-57.

Orliac, Michel & Catherine Orliac. (transl. Paul Bahn) 2008. *Trésors de l'île de Pâques. Treasures of Easter Island. Collection de la congrégation des Sacrés-Coeurs de Jésus et de Marie SS.CC*. Geneva, Éditions D - Frédéric Dawance & Paris, Editions Louise Leiris.

Salmond, Anne. 2008. Voyaging exchanges: Tahitian pilots and European navigators. In Anne Di Piazza & Erik Pearthree (eds). *Canoes of the Grand Ocean*. Oxford, British Archaeological Reports International Series Number S1802.

## ***Panel 3***

# ***Accepting Death***

*(Fri 26/03/2010; 11.30am-1.00pm)*

## **Death and the City: Mortuary Rituals and Urban Renewal in Surabaya**

***Robbie Peters  
University of Sydney***

***'We are each of us celebrating some funeral'  
Baudelaire***

### ***Abstract***

Death ceremonies have long constituted a rich vein of analysis for ethnographers of Indonesia. During my recent fieldwork I observed the continued centrality of these ceremonies, as well as a strong philosophical orientation towards death and the end of life among poor Javanese city dwellers. Keeping in mind the centrality of the politics of commemoration in Southeast Asian state building and citizenship formation, my paper focuses on funerals in a poor inner urban neighbourhood of Surabaya, Indonesia. Through this focus, the paper attempts to understand how commemoration for the city's poor and often partial citizens provides them with recognition in a city increasingly configured by the destructive forces of urban renewal – forces that offer little more than controlled public simulations of already destroyed social practices.

In more conceptual terms, this paper seeks to understand how an enduring and very localised social institution that consolidates and validates the social relationships that bind poor neighbourhoods can be reconciled with a view of the city as fuelled by a logic similar to Baudrillard's notion of perpetual death, redundancy and simulation, and Marx's vision in which all social relations melt into air before they can ossify. Seen in the context of a city that destroys and a municipal government that increasingly intervenes in the commemoration of death, this paper poses the notion that the control of the city hinges on the control of death.

## ***Introduction***

Death ceremonies have been a rich vein of analysis for ethnographers of Indonesia. During my recent return to a poor inner urban neighbourhood (*kampung*) in the large port city of Surabaya, I noticed the continued centrality of death ceremonies as well as a constant philosophical orientation towards death and the end of life. Keeping in mind the importance of the politics of commemoration in Southeast Asian state building and citizenship formation, this paper shows that death commemoration ceremonies provide a powerful form of territorial sovereignty for poor kampung dwellers, helping them combat the often destructive forces of urban renewal: forces that offer little more than controlled public simulations of already destroyed social practices.

In conceptual terms, this paper seeks to understand how an enduring and very localised social institution that consolidates and validates the social relationships that bind poor neighbourhoods, can be reconciled with a view of the city as fuelled by a logic similar to Baudrillard's notion of perpetual death, redundancy and simulation and Marx's vision of all social relations melting into air before they can ossify. Seen in the context of a city that destroys and a municipal government that increasingly intervenes in the commemoration of death, this paper poses the notion that the control of the city hinges on the control of death.

## ***The acceptance of death***

A constant orientation towards death permeates life in the low income kampungs of Surabaya. On the morning before I was leaving the inner city kampung of Dinoyo, my close friend of many years, a woman of my age (40) with whose family I have lived for several years while staying in the kampung, stated: 'Robbie, there is one thing I want to tell you. You are older now; we are both older and not getting any younger. Don't think of this world'. I knew that this concise piece of advice made sense according to a Javanese philosophy of fate that finds parallels in Islam's notion of the futility of pride, greed and status: things gained through the corporeal world. My friend's advice made me reflect on the comments made by a Javanese *Kiyai* (religious scholar) over twelve years before, when he gave a talk on life to an audience of kampung residents who had crowded into the main alley to hear some of his wisdom. In coarse Surabaya accent, the *kiyai* began by telling the audience: 'you all want what is nice, nice, nice; but can you take it into the afterlife? You don't need money there'. Curious about this notion that gains made in the corporeal world cannot be taken into the afterlife, I asked my friend what she meant by her comment 'don't think of this world'. She explained:

'In the teaching of all religions, we as humans must be responsible to god for what we do in this world. Therefore, what we do must be balanced between this world and the afterlife. As humans, we don't know how old we will live because what controls how long a person will be on earth is God. Whether we hope for a long life or not, life's path belongs with God. Therefore, we now must be



ready for that day when God takes our life and we leave this world. There is no need to regret coming closer to death.

Within what I have been taught of religion lies one hidden adage: 'Work as hard as you can because you'll possibly live for a very long time and also you might die tomorrow'. This adage holds a meaning: we have to work with diligence to fulfil our material needs because we might live a long time. And, also, we must worship with diligence to fulfil our spiritual needs because we could die tomorrow.'

There is no sense here of what Ernest Becker (1973) calls a 'denial of death'. Instead, death's inevitability is accepted and embraced to give life its meaning. According to Becker, the denial of death is inherent in most cultures and needs to be overcome because it is the basis of so much violence through exclusionary forms of citizenship like nationalism. This paper suggests that such violence is at least combated in Dinoyo through the acceptance of death.

## ***Mortality***

The acceptance of death as something looming makes sense in terms of poor people's proximity to death: a proximity typically associated with the street. Kampung mothers, for example, continually warn their children that illness caused by exposure to the elements, or *masuk angin* (wind entering the body), awaits them if they spend too long out on the street rather than inside the home or the kampung. For mothers in the small alley of ten households in which I lived, there was enough evidence to justify their concerns since each household had experienced a death due to causes other than old age over the past five years – deaths brought about through exposure to the street.

The street's dangers were conveyed through stories of death and misfortune, particularly those associated with the adjacent Mas River (*Kali Mas*). Dinoyo residents called this river the River of Blood (*Sungai darah*) to signify those periods – such as during the Battle of Surabaya in 1945, the overthrow of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) in 1965 and the licensed assassination of criminals by the police in 1982 – when the river swept the discarded corpses of the victims of politically motivated violence down-stream towards the sea. This association of the river with death was contemporised each time a corpse was found along the riverbank or seen floating down the river. A favourite place to congregate and drink alcohol, the river was also the place where several kampung men had died after falling into alcoholic comas. According to their friends and family, these men had succumbed to the river's dark magic rather than to alcohol.

One young man whose father had died along the river after a night-long drinking binge treated the river with great caution and, like most residents, referred to it as a 'magic river'. According to him, people must 'be careful near the river', because it has dangerous powers, which have claimed many lives. Verifying his claims, he referred to a young man who had only recently 'disappeared' while running from the police. This incident related to a police raid some days earlier, when a group of young men who had been gambling



along the riverbank fled to escape capture. One among them never returned. For kampung residents, the conclusions were unanimous: the river had 'swallowed him up' (*tertelan*).

Death along the river captured the macabre fascination of kampung men. When someone spotted a corpse along the river, news would spread quickly through the kampung and men would rush out of the alleyways, line the river bank, climb trees for a better vantage point and yell updates on the corpse's position to friends below. This collective viewing of the corpse in public space seemed a misplaced version of the viewing of the corpse during a funeral as discussed by James Siegel (1983), who noted that the corpse offered a model of appropriate expression. Dinoyo men concurred with Siegel's explanation as they sat in a riverside *warung* (street stall) one night discussing the issue. They reasoned that the expression of the corpse models an appropriate expression because that expression is inevitable for all at death. The corpse along the river, however, modelled a death that was inappropriate. Yet, for many kampung men who feared following the fate of their ancestors, such inappropriate death was seemingly inevitable. Along the river, every corpse floating down it or deposited along its banks symbolised a malicious force that the kampung man did not control: a force that claimed the lives of his relatives and ancestors. Every such corpse was also a potential reflection of himself and his own fate.

## **Restoration**

Death and redundancy take other commonplace forms in the city. Following Graham and Thrift (2007), we only become aware of the existence of many urban forms when they break down and die. This occurred during the political and economic crisis of 1998, when the failure and eventual death of Surabaya's New Order administration was brought to the fore by the traffic jams caused by the cars that queued for petrol before the government drastically reduced the petrol subsidy, and by the buskers, beggars and street stalls that clogged the street side due to the growing numbers of people dropped into poverty by spiralling inflation and unemployment (see Sidel, 1998). Referred to locally as *macet* ("broken", "chaotic"), these conditions brought the failure of the city to the fore and, through it, the failure of the state. The New Order government of General Suharto (1966-98) had failed to maintain subsidies and contain poverty, bringing about a crisis in its legitimacy that enabled the poor to take over the street and disrupt what John Pember-ton (1994: 6) called the 'idealized absence' of disorder that Suharto had strove to maintain along the street. It was with reference to these moments of breakdown and urban disorder that Abidin Kusno (2010: 54) noted that conditions on the street have been a barometer of political stability in Indonesia. While the appearance of disorder is interesting for this reason, what is also interesting, however, is the means by which order is restored.

During the New Order, moments of failure were usually followed by brutal doses of state violence to restore order and secure the interests of the Suharto family. This occurred in 1965 during the purging of communists from the city, and in 1982 during the purging of street gangs from the city. In the post New Order period to the present, state crackdowns on society take the form of so called anti-terror raids into kampung

homes and boarding houses. Whether during the New Order period or after, the common denominator in all these examples has been the sudden and momentary spectacle of terror as a means of social control (Elson, 2002: 173). At all other times, the far less conspicuous method of what Graham and Thrift (2007) call repair and maintenance prevails.

In present day Surabaya, repair and maintenance is most apparent through the restoration and renovation of its colonial buildings. Dinoyo's surrounding area is replete with such a restored landscape. In the adjacent industrial estate where Dinoyo residents once laboured, the Heineken Brewery and Barata machinery workshops, two of the estate's largest concerns prior to its complete deindustrialisation by 2000, are now restored. The brewery is a home improvement centre that has been meticulously renovated: its exterior rendered and whitewashed and its large and rickety old doors and windows refitted with expensive teak replicas. The brewery's new facade matches with the nearby replication of a Javanese palace that encases the Novotel hotel upon which the Unilever factory once stood. Nearby, at the old Barata machinery workshop, an indoor soccer centre is fully encased in the restored old factory, where replica lights gleam down on the soccer players while spectators sip soft drinks served by attractive female hosts who shuffle along in tight mini-skirts.

These ornately restored factories that house the city's new service industry exclude the very kampung people that once worked there. There is no expression of injustice, however, about this exclusivity and no sense that the death of a local industrial working class had to take place to enable the restoration of these buildings. The renovation and repair process that has reconfigured these buildings into zones of conspicuous middle class consumption seems, following Graham and Thrift, to have gone unnoticed. Repair and maintenance are inconspicuous and much unlike the 'shock tactics' that General Suharto said had formed his method of urban management during periods of crisis (Elson, 2002: 173). Rather than shock tactics, the violence of urban renewal in the present bears more resemblance to Suharto's doctrine of development, or *pembangunan* (Heryanto, 1998). A form of intervention by means other than naked violence, *pembangunan* is powerfully symbolised through the building or repair of infrastructure like roads, bridges, homes and kampung alleyways.

Unlike the *pembangunan* of the New Order period, the *pembangunan* of the present does not involve the so called "people," or *rakyat*. During the New Order, the *rakyat* built kampung alleyways and homes through community work projects known as *kerja bakti* and built roads and bridges through public works projects known as *inpres* (*instruksi president*: presidential instruction) schemes. The *pembangunan* of the present is captured by the city's new hotels, plazas and restored factories. Such buildings are icons of the new *pembangunan* and link into one another through efficient road networks that resemble what Latham (2000: 11) called a 'plexus' or 'narrow constellation', where 'the choices and room to move within it are typically constrained'. These roads link these buildings to middle class homes through what Denis Rogers (2004) calls fortified networks accessible by four wheel drive vehicle. In contrast to what Dick and Rimmer (1998) in their study of the Southeast Asian city called the bundled city where people live in self contained gated communities, a city made up of fortified networks relies on an efficient road transport system that

can carry a person from their home to the plaza, for example, without them having to get out somewhere in between and exit the secure air conditioned cocoon that has become the hallmark of middle-class existence in large Indonesian cities.

Through its reliance on petrol powered transport, a city of fortified networks constrains the movement of the poor by exposing them to the increasing price of fuel and public transport and the unmanageable loans for motorbikes (see Peters 2009; 2010). These costs cut the poor off from access to road transport and from what the World Bank (2009) recently promoted as the benefits of economic growth brought about through the accelerated passage of people and goods through cities.

The violence and death caused by this imperative towards acceleration and circulation is captured along the street by an aesthetic abhorrence of poverty and disorder. Like the idealised paintings of rural panoramas and garden settings born out of the period of urban dystopia in 19th century England, Surabaya's streets are the painter's canvas of idealistic urban planners with a deep aversion to disorder. Surabaya's streets convey a painting in the making that is regularly touched up through the daily sweeping of streets, whitewashing of gutters, greening of riverbanks and trimming of the hedges and verges of roundabouts. Hotels, plazas and museums across the city play their part by conveying those forms that are defunct along the street – forms such as the pedicab (*becak*) and the street stall (*warung*). In these places, mock warungs sell more authentic food that was once available on the street, while restored becaks stand like antique references to a bygone era.

If, as Baudrillard (1998) states, simulation is death, then its setting is the street, which, as Abidin Kusno (2000: 117; 103) terms, is 'a space of discipline and fear' and 'framework for [the] displacement' for the poor. Surabaya's most prominent urban planner, Johan Silas (1996: 528), uses one verb to describe how the municipal government shifts the poor from sight and revokes their claims to the street. The verb is *gusur*, which Silas defined as 'to make/instruct someone to shift location'. He states: 'So, if you experience *gusur*, it means you have moved location and someone or something has caused or instructed it to happen'. *Gusur* underpins urban renewal in Surabaya: it highlights the ignoble side of the new *pembangunan*, which has as its imperative the displacement for the poor.

## ***Networks of disconnection***

A state backed initiative to unclog roads and accelerate vehicular mobility through Surabaya has destroyed important street side income earning activities like street vending and *becak* driving. Since the mid-1990s, for example, the number of motorbikes has increased six-fold (from 461,000 in 1995 to around 3 million in 2010), while the number of becaks has dropped from around 27,000 to around 3,000 (SDA, 1995: 330; SDA, 2005/6: 352; *Surabaya Post*, 3/1/2010: 31). The dwindling number of *becak* drivers no longer wait for customers at street corners, *kampung* entry gates and intersections as they did in the past; they now keep cycling around the street in an attempt to both find customers and avoid the police, who are

intent on eradicating the becak to make way for vehicular traffic. The warung, like the becak, is a mobile income earning instrument that has enabled its operators since colonial times to evade the police by shifting location. Makeshift and dismantlable, it stands as testimony to a city intolerant of forms that once provided an income and formed an agora of sorts where kampung residents exchanged information and jobs.

The elimination of warung and becak from the street is an elimination of this valued form of communication among kampung. Called *berkumpul* (socialising/congregation), Surabaya's urban poor capture its meaning through the following Javanese adage: 'whether you eat or not, what's important is getting together' (*mangan ngak mangan sing penting berkumpul*). As an example, when people sit in a warung or when becak drivers cluster at an intersection waiting for customers, they mingle. While mingling, they hear of some work available for someone able to paint a house, a peddler of second hand clothing finds customers, a scrap picker meets someone willing to buy his scrap metal, a petty criminal finds a buyer for some marijuana he had purchased and a broker finds a buyer for a watch that someone wants to sell. Berkumpul underpins an informal economy. A destruction of berkumpul is then a destruction of the ability to earn income and gain the work that is enabled through this exchange of information among the poor.

The most recognisable features of Surabaya's streetscape in the present are no longer warungs and becaks, but bulldozers and the growing corps of civilian police (*pangreh praja*) dedicated to the tearing down of warungs and eradication of becaks. Bulldozers and black uniformed civilian police are the tangible expressions of a government now pouring investment into road construction and road widening. In Surabaya, in 2010 alone, authorities planned construction of 13 new linking roads that are set to cut through kampungs and market areas; the city's gross oversupply of plazas continues unabated with five more under construction; and street-stall traders continue to be dragged away kicking and screaming from roadsides and public parks during daily clearance operations by the police (*Jakarta Post*, 22/5/2009; Harasaputra and Faisal, 2009). Municipal finances fund this reclamation of the street, with the head of the municipal government's Body for Development Planning, or Bappeko (*Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Kota Surabaya*), calling for a continual scaling up of funding for its urban renewal project – a call which has the full backing of the municipal government's Finance Committee (*Anggota Panitia Anggaran*), whose head announced: 'We're ready to [provide the finances] to drive the process' (*JPO*, 13/9/2009).

## ***From accumulation by dispossession to legibility by dispossession***

The exclusion and suspension of basic rights to the city that results from gusur are only the initial stage of a clearing out process aimed at the reconfiguration of the citizen through all out drives to document the occupation of space as well as people's movement across it. Licensing caravans, licence checks and police raids on squatter settlements and kampung homes to document residents and their motor vehicles are now commonplace. These initiatives forge a citizens by documenting them. The targets of these initiatives are documented, rather than prosecuted. As one confused victim of a police raid on his squatter shack stated:

“This is only a shack, but we have been made Surabaya residents” (*Java Post*, 16/4/08). For the police, their granting of residency to the squatter made perfect sense because there was no right of residency other than that bestowed through legal documents by the state — documents requiring regular renewal and always subject to summary revocation by the state.

Gwen van Eijk (2010) makes the astute observation that the new geography of exclusion taking place in many cities is not simply the result of economically driven urban renewal imperatives but the result of a forging of a new and more surveillable citizen. Numerous studies are now showing that this involves the tracking and targeting of more geographically mobile people in a post 9/11 urban landscape in which the mobile person is a potentially murderous and insidious figure (Weber, 2005; Duffield, 2007; Amore, 2009; Graham, 2010). As crucibles of mobility and passage, cities are no longer sites of anonymous flaneur-like personas, who transit leisurely through the streets. They are now places of undocumented and illegible persons who can cause maximum destruction by metamorphosing into terrorists. The city, in this understanding, harbours terrorists and forms what Graham (2010) calls a city under siege, or what Samuel Weber (2005) calls a militarised city.

State crack-down on movement through the city and the undocumented persons it harbours is not new in Indonesia: such crack downs occur every year during the return home to celebrate the end of the Islamic fasting month as roads fill with traffic and opportunists descend upon bus terminals to pick pockets and swindle people out of their tickets and cash. In the wake of terrorist attacks and well publicised fears that the city is being overrun by migrants, the police are now extending the crackdown to all time frames. The site of these crack downs at present is the rooming house, or *kos kosan*, which has undergone a boom that is transforming the kampung as entrepreneurs build dormitories in the city’s kampungs to house the growing numbers of migrant workers in rooms of around 2 by 2 metres that accommodate up to four people who cram in to reduce costs.

A distinguishing feature of Surabaya in comparison to East Java’s other towns is the amount of rental accommodation as well as those who rent. In comparison with the average for East Java’s towns, Surabaya has by far the lowest number of owners (53 percent compared with 86%) and by far the greatest number of renters (14.82 percent compared with 2.07%) and boarders (14.47 compared with 3.2%). In addition, those who most often seek accommodation in the city’s rooming houses and rented rooms – young adults between 15-30 years old – are around 2 to 5 times more numerous in Surabaya than the urban average for East Java (*Hasil Susenus* 2007: 153; *Statistical Yearbook of Indonesia* 2008: 5). These statistics alone seem to confirm the popular impression that Surabaya is a city of rooming houses inhabited by a young adult migrant population. For many, this is a dangerous trend. Pointing to what he termed the ‘attack’ on Surabaya of the growing numbers of newcomers (*pendatang*), for example, the head of Surabaya’s Department of Religion singled out rooming house owners, stating: ‘don’t seek big rental returns’ and warned that if the flood of newcomers is not managed it will ‘endanger everyone’ (*Jawa Pos Online*, 16/12/2009).

This idea of a city under siege by newcomers goes back to the early years of independence, when it found regular expression in the barefoot clown of the popular comedy troupes (*ludruk*) that drew large crowds in the kampungs up until the 1970s. The ludruk clown typically appeared with swag over his shoulder, bare-chested and with pantaloons made of gunny sacks. Representing the newcomer who fumbled his way around an unfamiliar urban landscape, he also represented a typical land use pattern in what was then called the 'Third World'. According to Dick and Rimmer (1998: 2309), that land use pattern was characterised by 'the collapse of the segregated colonial city ... [as] people moved with impunity into low density urban space'. In the Indonesian language, this land use pattern was termed tanah perjuangan, or 'land of struggle' [in the sense of a revolutionary freedom fight to reclaim territory/sovereignty] (Tosa, 1983; RI, 1953; Silas, 1996: 135). This pattern of land use was suddenly ended in 1965/6 with the obliteration of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), who had given it their vocal support. The obliteration of the communists was in effect the obliteration of this land use pattern and the forging of a new city. As Dick (2003: 109) states, it was 'the first stage in urban rehabilitation'.

The obliteration of communists did not simply constitute a new land use pattern; it also constituted a new urban citizen. This new citizen had its foundations in the mass public funeral in Jakarta for the six generals murdered in the coup attempt that supposedly involved the communists. Taking place several weeks before the brutal purge of communists began, the mass funeral catalysed the anti-communist putsch around the emotional symbol of the revolutionary war hero, the most sanctified symbol of the new Indonesian nation. All six murdered generals had fought in the revolutionary struggle for Independence. Although revolutionary experience was a certainty for any soldier of this generation, including many communist soldiers and veterans, it served to bind the six generals into symbols of an affronted nationalism. The well, where the generals' bodies were discovered, became a nationalist monument infamously termed the crocodile hole (*lubang buaya*), while main streets throughout Surabaya and other cities were renamed after the generals.

Heroes were created, but more importantly, the mass public funeral in Jakarta marked the beginnings of a new non-citizen in Indonesia – the communist. In Surabaya, the Hero's Monument, a towering modernist monolith on the gravesite of fallen revolutionary fighters, was the point, around which the Surabaya district military commander, Colonel Sukotjo, rallied together the different social groups and political parties to go out and kill the communists, in what was called the mass Akbar Rally of 16th October 1965. The purges began on that day. By the end of the year, Surabaya was declared by the military to be purged of communists. As many as seventeen thousand communist sympathisers were killed in Surabaya and many more tortured, starved and imprisoned (see Setiyawan and Sarkawi, 2010: 5). The killings marked a new beginning for the communist, who was kept alive in the popular imagination as a looming and insidious figure hiding in the city and ready to take any chance to re-establish authority.

This re-inscription of urban space with the memory of the dead generals unleashed that internal and constitutive villain that Giorgio Agamben (1998: 105, 107) called the wolf man of man, who formed at the



moment the city was formed. A variety of what Agamben calls 'bare life', the wolf man could be hunted down and summarily executed to safeguard the city. Nevertheless, he remained untamed and not yet fully purged from the city, surfacing from time to time within it and from among its seemingly benign personas. The runaway communist was such a figure, dwelling unknown within the New Order city and an apparent danger to it. According to military instructions aired once the purging of communists began drawing to a close in Surabaya by late 1965, the city's informal sector and its squatter settlements were deemed the hiding place for communists, justifying a constant state of emergency against them and enabling the police and army to act with impunity against criminals or anyone deemed a fomenter of disorder.

The end point of this impunity was the powerful communicative device of the abandoned and disfigured corpse. Dick (2003: 106) provides a pertinent example, stating: 'For weeks [after the killings] there were bodies floating in the Kali Mas. Until the government gave orders for a clean up, it was a brave man who had the courage to give any a decent burial.' The nature of the commemoration, rather than just the killing itself, was crucial in the constitution of the new form of bare life known as the communist, who would occupy Indonesia's political landscape for the next three decades.

## ***Death and the control of life: Citizenship formation in the New Order City***

The constitution of the non-citizen hinged on the denial of the right to commemorate death and was used to great effect during the global recession of 1982, when General Suharto employed the police to kill so called 'criminals' and leave their corpses along the street and riverbanks as a warning to the dissident elements from among the lower orders of Indonesian society. Through this mode of communication, the New Order was forging citizens by intervening in a ritual that was the most constitutive of community membership in Java. That ritual was the death *slametan* (communal feast and associated prayers), which served to mourn the deceased and verify their presence within a community.

The community here is that which occurs in real time through those present at a *slametan*. The spectacle of the defeated and decaying corpse communicated the absence of a *slametan* and the existence of a bare life that was not yet incorporated into community. Unincorporation through the absence or inability to be mourned in a *slametan* was a most powerful means of exclusion and was documented by Clifford Geertz (1973) in his account of the politicisation of a *slametan* in the Indonesian town of Pare during the 1950s. In Geertz's account, the ferocity of political divisions in 1950s Indonesia settled on the shock of the stiffened corpse of a young boy that a religious officiator refused to bury because of the leftist political sympathies of his parents. The stiffened, unmourned corpse symbolised the terror of social exclusion. Throughout the New Order, it symbolised the defeated villain of New Order society – the petty criminal and the communist.



## ***Inversion of the slametan***

The slametan is an inherently inclusive institution that verifies community through those in attendance (Jay, 1969; Geertz, 1973; Siegel, 1983; Guinness, 1986). As Siegel (2000: 196) contends: 'It seems to me that there is a local community and the slametan is its ritual expression'. The use of commemoration to deny membership was institutionalised during the New Order through a politicisation of commemoration that both marked and bolstered its rule. In middle class neighbourhoods, this involved an inversion of the slametan's functioning as an inclusive institution. Aris Mundayat (2005) provides the best example of the way the slametan served to exclude people during the late-New Order period. In detailing how the slametan inverted its inclusive function by functioning, instead, to exclude outsiders in a middle class neighbourhood of Jogjakarta, Central Java, Mundayat is able to show how this inversion was successfully contested by an NGO lobbying on behalf of the poor. In his account of the fight to bury the street kid, Dodo, Mundayat highlights what is more implicitly a struggle against a middle-class neighbourhood's creation of non-citizens.

Dodo's burial was not an attempt to prevent his unsettled spirit from turning into a roaming ghost that would haunt the living, such as in the examples by Shaun Malarney (2001) of Vietnamese war dead: it was, instead, a challenge to an urban trajectory that negated the poor from the street and relegated them into a frontier of illegible urban spaces and populations that are absent from the municipal imagination of the city. In the Mundayat example, Jogjakarta's poor street people struggled to redeem their members from this administrative frontier and resettle them back into society through appropriate commemoration. This imperative to redeem those personas absent from the municipal imagination of the city is enabled through the map of being in the world that the slametan so effectively captures. It is this map that the state struggles to control.

In Surabaya, funerals rather than rallies, political parties or NGOs communicate the sovereignty of poor kampung people, who tend to shun the standard political franchise of the ballot box – viewing it as a mock sovereignty that attracts the participation of only 50 per cent of the population (*Java Post*, 29/6/05; 26/5/2008). Finding no representation through the standard organs of neoliberal democracies, the kampung poor are at the bare life end of the scale of political sovereignty. Through slametans, as Siegel (2000) notes, kampung people find a reflection of themselves that is otherwise lacking in mainstream forms of political representation. This reflection of oneself occurs because slametans present and validate neighbourhood networks by bringing them to the fore and making them visible in one place and at one time.

In Surabaya, around 25 burials take place each day in public cemeteries, not to mention the far more numerous commemorations of the deceased that take place for between seven days and 40 days and then every 100 days, every 365 days and on the thousandth day after death (SDA, 2009: 213). In the kampung of Dinoyo, when a neighbour dies, the most official declaration of proceedings begins with the beating of a *kentongan* (small wooden or bamboo drum used to sound alarm), usually by a young boy as he walks the alleyways of the neighbourhood. The delineation of those for whom this message is intended, and therefore those who inevitably became involved in the commemoration of the deceased, defies the state's

imagination of neighbourhood that is conveyed in the maps of neighbourhood and ward boundaries that hang on the walls of municipal offices throughout the city.

In the wake of the state breakdown marked by the fall of General Suharto in 1998, the municipal government moved to intervene in the slametan by requiring the family of the deceased to notify the neighbourhood official, who then distributed to each household their family name cards (*kartu keluarga*). Receipt of these cards served as formal notification to household members of the death of a neighbour. This formal notification took the place of the informal call out through the beating of the kentongan. Unlike the sound of the kentongan, which was meant for all, the cards were meant to exclude those without residency cards by allowing them no notification of a funeral.

This rationalisation of the slametan was more than a simple rationalisation of municipal finances by preventing newcomers, or *pendatang*, access to the funeral allowance for kampung families. It underlined a far more invasive political project – the delineation of urban citizenship. Through the distribution of name cards, the state had found a way to effectively problematise the *pendatang*'s participation in the most important of kampung rituals and clearest verifier of community membership. This verification took place through what generations of anthropologists of the slametan term 'just being there', 'participation' and 'neighbourliness' (Jay, 1969; Geertz, 1973; Siegel, 1983; Guinness, 1986, 2009). While the name cards did not prevent the participation of *pendatang*, they served to highlight their status as outsiders at the moment when community membership in the kampung was most publically affirmed.

When compared with the violent intervention into the commemoration of death caused by the spectacle of the stiffened corpse, the name card initiative seemed a mild and even benign intervention – an example of Graham and Thrift's notion of the more subtle style of intervention captured in the mundane and largely unnoticed processes of repair and maintenance of the city undertaken by municipal governments. Control over commemoration, however, is a domain that those marginalised from the mainstream public sphere will not release from their grip. In a city where urban renewal creates death – both real and metaphorical – from public space, the slametan gains importance as a mechanism of reincorporation into the city for its poor people. Despite municipal attempts to intervene into the slametan to make it constitute citizens in accord with the municipal imagination, the slametan continues to represent a community reflected through those present rather than those registered as formal residents of the kampung.

Unlike the slametan, the municipal government's framing of the kampung population remains outdated and provides a poor representation of neighbourhood population dynamics. The huge chart on the wall of the ward office that gave a breakdown of population in each neighbourhood was eight years out of date, and the guard post computer meant to collate and store new data on population in the neighbourhood was broken. Whether through the incapacity of municipal administration to constitute a legible population, the negation of the poor from the street as part of the urban renewal process, or the denial of commemoration that results from the state's attempts to constitute citizens, the low income urban resident finds no recognition or reflection of him/herself in the city. It is against this background of absence from the formal maps

and public spaces of the city that kampung residents reclaim a space for their own representation of community – a representation that validates their being in the world rather than absence from it.

## **References**

- Agamben, G. 1998. *Homo Sacer: sovereign power and bare life*. Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- Amore, Louise. 2009. Algorithmic war: everyday geographies on the war on terror. *Antipode*, 1 (1), 49-69.
- Anderson, R. O'G. 2004. The World of Sergeant-Major Bungkus (Introduction). *Indonesia*, 78 (October), Pp. 1-6.
- Baudrillard, J. 1988. *Jean Baudrillard: selected writings*. Mark Poster, ed. Cambridge, Polity Press (chapter 5: symbolic exchange and death).
- Beatty, A. 1999. *Varieties of Javanese Religion: an anthropological account*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Becker, E. 1997 [1973]. *The Denial of Death*. New York, Free Press.
- Dick, H and Rimmer, P. 1998. Beyond the Third World City: the new urban geography of Southeast Asia. *Urban Studies*, 35 (12), Pp. 2303-21.
- Dick, H. 2003. *Surabaya, City of Work: a socio-economic history, 1900-2000*. Athens, Ohio University Press, 2003.
- Duffield, M. 2007. *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the world of peoples*. Malden, M.A: Polity Press.
- Elson, R. E. 2002. In Fear of the People: Suharto and the justification of state-sponsored violence under the New Order, in F. Colombijn and J. T. Lindblad (eds.). *Roots of Violence in Indonesia: contemporary violence in historical perspective*. Leiden, KITLV Press.
- Geertz, C. 1973. Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese example, in C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York, Basic Books.
- Graham, F., and Thrift, M. 2007. Out of order: understanding repair and maintenance. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 24 (3), Pp. 1-25.
- Graham, S. 2010. *Cities Under Siege: the new military urbanism*. London, Verso.
- Guinness, P. 1986. *Harmony and Hierarchy in a Javanese Kampung*, Oxford University Press, Singapore.
- Guinness, P. 2009. *Kampung, Islam and State in Urban Java*. Singapore, NUS Press.
- Hasil Survey Social Economy Nasional 2007, Propinsi Jawa Timur* (National Social and Economic Survey Results 2007, East Java Province). Surabaya, Badan Pusat Statistik Jawa Timur.

- Heryanto, A. 1988. The Development of "Development". *Indonesia*, v. 26 (October), Pp. 1-24.
- Jay, R. 1969. *Javanese Villagers: social relations in rural Modjokuto*. Cambridge, MA, MIT Press.
- Kusno, A. 2000. *Behind the Postcolonial: architecture, urban space and political cultures in Indonesia*. London, Routledge.
- Kusno, A. 2010. *The Appearances of Memory: mnemonic practices of architecture and urban form in Indonesia*. Durham, Duke University Press.
- Malarney, S. 2001. The fatherland remembers your sacrifice, in H. Ho Tai (ed), *The country of memory: re-making the past in late-socialist Vietnam*. London, University of California Press.
- Mundayat, A. 2005. *Ritual and Politics in New Order Indonesia: a case study of discourse and counter-discourse in Indonesia*. Melbourne, Swinburne University of Technology PhD thesis.
- Peters, R. 2009. *The assault on occupancy in Surabaya: legible and illegible landscapes in a city of passage*. *Development and Change* (special edition: 'Cities of Extremes'), 40 (5), Pp. 903-925.
- Peters, R. 2010. The wheels of misfortune: the street and cycles of displacement in Surabaya. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 40 (4), Pp. 568-8.
- Rogers, D. 2004. Disembedding the city: crime, insecurity and spatial organisation in Managua, Nicaragua. *Environment and Urbanization*, v. 16. Pp. 113-24.
- Setiyawan, D and H. Sarkawi. 2009. *The social dynamics of anti-communist violence in Surabaya: a microhistory of kampung Simo Jawar*. Unpublished paper presented at the International Conference on the Urban Kampung. Faculty of Culture, Airlangga University, Surabaya, 19-21 January, 2009.

## **Panel 4**

# **The Future of Myth**

*(Fri 26/03/2010; 11.30am-1.00pm)*

## **Technology, Disorder and the End of Work<sup>1</sup>**

***Jon Marshall***  
***University of Technology, Sydney***

### ***Abstract***

Technology opens a mythic field. It is often perceived as a mode of salvation, a set of procedures by which any problems can be solved or even a new humanity created. Cultures have been ranked in terms of a linear technological development. Alongside this vision there has been a long-standing tradition which sees technology as a form of damnation, as a way whereby humans are alienated from themselves, from spirit or soul, and from nature. In both cases, what is held to be special about technology is that it seems to 'end worlds', either through millennial 'advancement' and control, or through apocalypse or decay. Originally technology was to end work and produce leisure, nowadays technology seems devoted to the ends of work, to furthering the spread and demands of work. However, in extending and intensifying the orders of work, technology disrupts those orders. As a result many people's lives are embedded in confusion and uncertainty; they hope that technology will free them, but fear it will enslave them or lead them to disaster. Recognising these disjunctions should influence the ways we approach and analyse the 'information society'.

**Keywords:** 'Information society', disorder, technology, millennialism, apocalypse

---

<sup>1</sup> The project of which this work is part is supported by an ARC research fellowship

## ***Introduction***

This paper is a preliminary report of investigations into the interrelation of technology, work and disorder in Australia, based on the repeated observations that computer technology frequently produces disruption or fails, despite the aura of salvation it sometimes wears. The paper is primarily theoretical and stage setting, as it explores the mythology around technology in the contemporary West, while looking briefly at twenty-four, roughly hour-long, interviews with 10 women and 14 men who have experienced difficult software installations at various levels (business analysts, members of IT departments, software testers, project managers, and workers). A later paper will explore these interviews in greater depth so as to demonstrate the upheavals and confusions which seem common in the workplace, and which centre on information technology and the ongoing failures of management as a social form.

In this paper, I propose that technology resonates with a mythic field and, as such, initiates and expresses existential anxieties. In particular technology incarnates the counterpositionary myths of beneficial Millennium or destructive Apocalypse. Technology is also often seen to possess its own imperatives and its own life which is often inimical to humans, while at the same time promising unending wealth and prosperity. Mythically, in the West, technology always ends worlds or begins new worlds. Technology may gain these mythic properties because of its paradoxical role; while used to organise social life it also disorganises social life. This may cause problems in conceptualisation as Western thought has tended to separate order and disorder from each other as opposites, with order as good and disorder as bad, rather than seeing them as intertwined. Taking this paradoxical potential seriously, opens a perspective into the interrelation between order and disorder, or to what I have called the 'order/disorder complex'.

Through this complex, technology is tied a) to the failure of 'management' as a social directive, b) to the necessity of sites of informal resistance or counter-ordering so that organisations can continue to work, c) to the internal politics of organisations which overwhelm practicality or instrumentality, and d) to the failure of communication and modelling of work and other realities in these contexts. The project as a whole, aims to suggest a different way of looking at the 'Information Society' in which that society is not seen as being totally based upon 'rational' processes that generate accuracy, resilience, domination and technological success, but also on processes which generate inaccuracy, fragility, inadequacy and failure.

## ***Information technology and disorder***

The repeated failure of information technology (IT) is well known. Saran (2003) refers to a survey of 450 IT directors across the UK, Germany and France, of whom 73% had suffered major faults in their IT systems, 43% claimed poor software produced a substantial drop in staff productivity and 45% said the software had damaged the company's image among clients and prospective clients. Huber (2003) reports another survey



in which “54% of projects failed to deliver on the planned-for functionality”, 9% were abandoned and only 16% of the projects “hit all their targets (budget, schedule and scope/functionality)”. El-Emam and Koru (2008) report on two years of web surveys, claiming: “26 percent to 34 percent of IT projects fail”. These reports arise from surveys of people in IT and IT management, so perceptions of disruption and failure might be much higher if we factor in ordinary users.

Furthermore, in an organisation of any size, there may be a number of software upgrades, or new systems, being worked on at any one time. All the project managers we talked with were in charge of more than one project, which shows the ideological importance of modifying IT, even with the knowledge that it may be disruptive. One manager was personally in charge of eight separate projects and, as a whole, that organisation was engaged in about twenty significant IT modifications for that year. These may not have been geared to occur simultaneously, but in sequence, to avoid a massive ‘hit’ of disruptions, but no sooner have people dealt with one upgrade they have to deal with another, with the problems of all these ‘improvements’ interacting with each other in unexpected ways. When we put together the failure rates from the paragraph above together with this number of software upgrades, we might expect that the information workplace is continually on the verge of disruption and uncertainty, and that it is possible that the need for such constant improvement occurs because of the ongoing disruption produced by improvement. The process would not appear to be entirely ‘rational’ or well planned.

However the disruption is not just internal, but affects those who deal with organisations from the outside as well. Among the more recent publicly reported disruptions, we can instance the failure of the Bank of Queensland eftpos terminals at the start of 2010 (Cartwright 2010), the Qantas booking system which crashed in November 2009 and January 2010 (Vasek 2010), the Commonwealth Bank Netbank collapse of June-July 2009 (WAToday 2009), or the recent difficulties faced by the Australian Tax Office (Martin 2010). Not all difficulties reach the newspapers. When I began to write this paper my bank account was stopped without notice, isolating me from any funds, making me miss required payments. During the paper’s course my email was automatically ‘upgraded’ with several strange results. Similarly, those interviewed for this project report ongoing failure and disruption, as well as puzzlement over such problems. They described their reactions to computer failure in themselves and others, in terms which ranged over feelings of stupidity, anger, panic, indifference, and being overwhelmed. In most cases the reactions described were intense, and perhaps indicative of disruption of personal functioning, so we should expect that failure will be fraught, and surrounded with ‘irrational’ and forceful responses.

Defining disorder or failure is always difficult, or uncertain, and is often the subject of political struggle, serving differing functions for differing groups; especially when experience, competence, ‘ownership’, or blame is involved. Blame in particular can be used to scapegoat particular social categories, and restore ‘normality’. What one person regards as failure another may regard as mere inconvenience or even as a success; something that was clear in the interviews. In any case, software disruption can lead to the ongoing *political* disruption of work. However, technology does not only disrupt because of failure. Trouble can also arise because the IT, or other technological system, works too well, or its local success disorders other

systems. If fossil fuel engines had not been so successful then we would not have damaged our environment so badly. If IT did not make data collection so easy and efficient, then we could not be defined by our data trails and have our identities abducted so easily. IT is a major source of disruption, *because* of its success and ubiquity.

However, IT was not the only cause of disruption that was reported. The interviews imply that almost everyone in work was rendered confused and desperate by management actions and policies, which rarely seemed to be integrated into the tasks they had to perform, or to what they considered to be the realities of the workplace. Confusion at work, particularly in office work, seems to be a relative norm.

The recurrence of such failure and disruption means that these factors are a regular feature of social life, and hence part of that social life. They need explaining, factoring in, and taking seriously, without being thought of as irrelevance, a result of incompetence, a temporary aberration, or as evidence of a transitional state between two ordered realms in the past and future.

## ***Technology and myth***

Starting with myth is not meant to imply myth is 'prior' – although mythic imagination often predates technological innovation. It might be suggested that a dominant Western myth is that we have no myth, that we are essentially pragmatic and reasonable. However, technology, in the West in particular, is embroiled in myth in the Malinowskian sense of myth being a way of describing the world which is also a charter for action and a template for perceiving the world. Myth is a "living reality" (Malinowski 1926: 18ff.). Myth is not necessarily false, fantastical or 'supernaturally' based (however we define that), and what we recognise as history or science can also be 'myth'. There is no sharp distinction between a myth and any other impersonal narrative that is taken as true. A myth seems to be a matter of fact to those guided by it, a potentially shared basis for meaning. While myth grows out of social experience, and narrative exchange with others, it also directs our attention to, or perhaps creates, facets of the world and their apparent arrangement, so that a narrative may gain its 'rightness' from its mythic background. Myth provides the cosmology within which problems, and the ways to generate solutions, appear.

Depth psychology argues that myth plays a role in our psyches, shaping those psyches and expressing them (Walker 1995). Myths can express the three-way struggle of ego, unconscious processes, and the world, giving guidance for the likely socially acceptable paths of those processes, and providing compensations when the paths are not acceptable. Myths are 'metaphoric' or 'symbolic' ways of expressing what is otherwise inexpressible; as such they provide the axioms of discourse, and form an ongoing groping after the mystery of existence (Hughes 1993: 2ff.). When faced with new situations, as we often are with technology, we tend to think in terms of previously familiar events and stories, and thus think analogically, or symbolically. Our, often unexpressed, axioms are nearly always symbolic, in this sense, for the simple reason that they seem obvious and need no justification – as for example, in 19th Century physics, when scientists thought atoms were like

billiard balls, because hardness was an assumed property of the real; nowadays it is not so clear. However, the resonances of myth, while shared, and exchanged, can be shared with variation and in fragments. Myths do not have to be coherent or without contradiction either internally or with respect to other myths<sup>2</sup>. They are frequently subject to argument, or reinterpretation, depending on the situation being faced, the aims of particular rhetoric and contestations over appropriate telling. However, it seems probable that a selection process occurs, so that symbols which get used again and again do so because they have 'pull' in recurrent situations, or help define those situations.

As attempts to deal with mysteries, myths will build up around problem areas, especially those conflicted areas which apparently solve problems while, simultaneously, generating problems. In the West, what we have defined as 'technology' is such a conflicted area, and 'work' is another.

## ***Technological myth and society***

Over the last two to three hundred years the Western world has come to be seen as a technological and pragmatic civilisation, and one of the major myths of this world has been that of technology as a prime driver of culture and society. The myth has arisen that the West has succeeded, and reached dominance through technology, and thus success comes through updating or upgrading technology. The implication is that those who fail this in competition will be superseded.

The force of this myth has led to cultures being ranked in terms of a linear technological development: Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age, age of sail, industrial age, and to whatever age you think we are in now, nuclear, space, or information etc. Any number of theories relate social change to a particular development of technology such as irrigation (Wittfogel 1957), the stirrup (White 1966), writing or the printing press (Innis 1950), the steam engine, the automobile (Urry 2004), telecommunications and so on. Information society theory has tended to promote the view that information technology changes everything. The myth has been important politically, as when Lenin claimed that "Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country" (1965: 516), and big businesses will insist their technology has to be up to date to survive competition. In sociology the modernisation thesis implied that the distribution of industrial technology, would inexorably lead everyone in the world to become like modern Americans, and hence that the world would become more or less uniform and 'democratic' (Epstein et al 2006). Whereas modernisation has normally been portrayed as a narrative of improvement, there is equally present a narrative of decline (is it good we all end up American?), both can be found during the whole period, emphasising that a myth usually occurs with a contradictory counter-position<sup>3</sup>.

---

**2** As was argued at length by Levy-Bruhl. Levy-Bruhl's work is compromised by his failure to recognise that the 'irrationalities' he observed in 'primitive' societies were also present in his own. Towards the end of his life, rather than investigating the role of 'participation' and 'prelogicality' in the West, he decided that the uniform nature of humanity meant that people everywhere had to be 'rational', and this in the late 1930s (1975: 49).

**3** Myths may need to be contradictory as representations of an unrepresentable and intertwined existence need to be paradoxical, as otherwise important representational features of that existence will be smoothed out, and the representations become inadequate and lose out to those that deal with the apparent contradictions.

## ***Technology and ends of worlds***

As technology is held to be a social determinant and is bound together with the mutual appearance of crisis and improvement, technology is easily attached to myths of apocalypse and millennium. These are central stories of the Christian world which focus on the ends of worlds and the potential for transformation. The *millennium* is the time of perfect rule before the last judgement, and the *apocalypse* the time of disaster and cataclysm before the millennium arrives. Millennium and apocalypse are often separated in their presentation, although being conjoined in the book of Revelations.

Technology is also related, through contrast, to Western conceptions of 'nature', or the Edenic state, as it is usually seen as artificial and not natural, despite the fact that animals and birds use tools. Mythically, technology is one of those things, like language, which is held to set us aside from the natural world. As such, it can also be ambivalently regarded – technology was developed after the fall and, according to the narrative of Genesis, primarily by the descendents of Cain. Such ambivalence can also be seen in the labels 'Promethean' or 'Faustian', or in the story of the tower of Babel, in which knowledge and technology, as well as being associated with achievement or civilisation, are also associated with the possibility of divine punishment or human hubris (Hulme 2009). The original Edenic state is usually seen as primordial and (apart from the fall) as potentially unchanging, something that must be restored, and thus in contrast with the constant change of technology or contemporary life. Often change itself is taken as evidence of inferiority; as 'true being', since Plato and Aristotle, has often been thought of as unchanging, or outside time (Eisendrath 2003). However attempts to impose stability and pristine purity on the Earth require the interruption of the flux of nature and thus can produce unexpected disruptions or failures (Merchant 2003). As Reynolds (1991) points out, it is relatively common for a technological modification of nature to require further technological modifications to counteract the problems produced by the earlier modifications.

In the millennium format, technology is perceived as a mode of salvation, a set of procedures by which any problems can be solved, a paradise formed on Earth, or even a new humanity created, or the body left behind. Some of this millennialism has passed into thinking about solutions to climate change such as making artificial carbon absorbing trees, or putting mirrors in space etc. It also seems common in managerial reactions to information technology, when technology can often seem to transcend people and be intrinsically good in itself. According to my interviews, and other sources, evaluation of technology often seems to be 'magical' in that there is no checking to see whether the new system is better than the old and, if so, *where* it is better than the old (Knox et al 2007). No person, when asked, reported any attempt by their management to see if the new system had actually improved work or made it easier, although (it is fair to say) given the often extreme differences between before and after, such improvement would be hard to evaluate. The guiding myths of technology and progress guarantee the value of the work, despite the reign of accountants and cost-benefit analysis elsewhere. Alongside the millennial vision, there has been a long-standing tradition which sees technology as a form of damnation; as a way whereby humans are alienated from themselves from spirit or soul, and from nature. This is a currently common attitude in people who begin their analysis of technology

with Heidegger (1977). In these tales technology leads to the end of the world as we know it, to another fall and hence to apocalypse.

This is not to say that Heidegger's analysis is without interesting or important points to make but essentially he is caught in the schema that the 'primordial' or "what was primally thought" (1977: 303) is deeper than the recently thought (rather than being equally 'unreal'), and that the technological is part of the poetic, but that the pure poetic is superior. He argues that both poetry and technology are connected to 'revealing' the truth about things, indeed originally *techne* applied to poetry (ibid: 315), but while poetry is a pure revealing, technology is a challenging (ibid: 296). The loss of this primordial resonance almost turns people into resources for the technology (ibid: 299-300), and "blocks the shining-forth and holding sway of truth... [and] the call of a more primal truth" (ibid: 309). It stops our purer response to nature; the Rhine as a source of electricity is no longer the same river as in Holderlin's poem (ibid: 297). This argument assumes the poet has no particular cause or point to make, no desire to direct the chaos of life; but poets have traditionally praised victors and patrons, celebrated home loyalties and even written philosophies; there is no necessary pure openness to 'truth' here either. Heidegger gives no evidence that poetry or culture is more primordial than technology; any acceptance of his points is granted by the power of our myths.

Within his framework Heidegger, is almost inevitably bound into the myths of Eden, millennium and apocalypse. Atomic energy "which can be unleashed either for destructive or for peaceful purposes", gets a mention and the whole of the second half of the text is entangled in "danger", "supreme danger", "threats", "monstrousness", "the very brink of a precipitous fall" and, on the other hand, "saving power". His focus becomes how to avoid the looming Apocalypse and how to reach Millennium, although as depth of thought is primordial, this is, for Heidegger, intertwined with a return to a poetic-artistic Eden; something perhaps demonstrated in his life, by his continual returns to a hut in the Black Forest (Sharr 2006).

More interestingly Heidegger seems to be arguing that the order and disorder of technology (and perhaps human process in general, once we move from the nostalgia for Eden) is tied together. His concept of "enframing" (*gestell* – 'frame', 'rack', 'trestle') could conceivably refer to a mode of ordering and categorisation. He distinguishes between 'setting in order', that involves care and attention to the thing being ordered, and ordering which only cares for the results or what is being extracted (1977: 296). Perhaps he makes a distinction between something being attended to and something being commanded (ibid: 297). With our technology, things are arranged for further ordering and the only things of value are those that can be ordered (ibid: 298). Technology, as we pursue it, stimulates a desire for 'our' order: "it banishes man into the kind of revealing that is an ordering" (ibid: 309), and sets us to "pursuing and promulgating nothing but what is revealed in ordering" (ibid: 307). "The will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control" (1977: 289). There is an implication that there is a world, and a world of human action, which can be disordered by human action, and that this might be endlessly compounding; the more we order through technology, demand, schematisation and simplification the more we disorder our world. However, another implication is that there is a millennial way of ordering which will solve our problems, and we can find it through Heidegger and the cultivation of primordial poesis. Heidegger also expresses a degree of am-

bivalence about technology as it opens the way to this return: “The closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine” (ibid: 317).

In the early days of the internet the ambivalence between Millennium and Apocalypse was quite marked. On behalf of the Millennium, academics could pronounce that “the revolution launched by the introduction of the integrated circuit means the end of empire” (Dudley 1991: 304). Author and consultant John Brockman, with a reference to the life in machines of the sort that I will discuss later, wrote with apparent ambivalence that:

“With the Internet and the World Wide Web, we are creating a new expansion of ourselves in much the same way as Mary Shelley’s Dr. Frankenstein pieced together his creation... an emergent electronic beast of such proportions that we can only imagine its qualities, its dimensions”.

Although Brockman generally celebrated what he called “distributed networked intelligence” which was: the infinite oscillation of our collective conscious interacting with itself<sup>4</sup>, adding a fuller, richer dimension to what it means to be human. I am the Internet. I am the World Wide Web. I am information. I am *content* (Brockman 1997).

Brockman issued a book of interviews with well known people within the Internet or Computing world; the self styled “Digerati”, which promises great change. In it, Stuart Brand wrote that “The Net is a major social event. Culture’s got to change” and, “Something different will happen, and it’s too early to discern what” (Brand 1997: 24). David Bunnell added “It’s bound to have a radical impact and transform our societies” (Bunnell 1997: 32).

People such as Rupert Murdoch, Bill Gates and Newt Gingrich all claimed that because of the Internet the Capitalist millennium could arrive and bring freedom and joy to all (Murdoch 1994; Gates 1995: chp 8<sup>5</sup>; Gingrich 1995: 57). It is possible the ‘irrational exuberance’ of the dot.com boom, a few years later, was similarly fuelled by these millenarian expectations, and the further expectations that profit would be unlimited.

On the other hand, Marxists Hardt and Negri imply that the internet furthers communication between workers and creates collaboration and thus automatically undermines capitalism, leading to the millennium of the paradise of the Multitude. The internet and the resulting informational economy supposedly frees liberation movements of the necessity of becoming organised in hierarchies, or of having to impose order after the chaos of revolution (2004: 68-78) and thus revolutionary freedom will finally be possible. Millennium is what you choose it to be.

---

<sup>4</sup> A phrase he liked enough to repeat in Brockman 2010

<sup>5</sup> Gates’ chapter is quite complex, but he recognizes that “frictionless capitalism” is not compatible with ‘net anarchy’ and that for lack of friction to occur obstacles, like dissent, must be removed or confined to reserves.



The Apocalyptic counterposition is not far away. Other people warned of the dire consequences arising from computers and the Internet, although these people frequently wrote as if they were a rejected minority; already overwhelmed by the apocalyptic machines. Sven Birkerts prophesied the loss of Soul, the loss of richness, depth and duration of subjectivity, and the loss of complexity of language and history (1994: 127-31, 210ff.). Stephen Talbot (1995) wrote of a fatal scattering of the self, of decaying community, and of somnambulistic organisations bringing ecological catastrophe through the abnegation or abandonment of reality. Žižek warned that speed of contact with the foreign would induce disconnection from bodily neighbours, that overwhelming choice would lead to the impossibility of choice, and that the postulated universal community could exclude, even more directly, those who could not participate (1997: 154). Sardar wrote that:

Cyberspace with its techno-Utopian ideology is an instrument for distracting Western Society from its increasing spiritual poverty, utter meaninglessness and grinding misery of everyday lives. Prepare for holographic Slashers to break out of 'alt.sex.stories' and stalk the earth (1996: 39).

It seemed that many people were, and still are, prepared to proclaim the extraordinary world changing nature of IT. This change is widely either anticipated as the new millennium bringing new life, or feared as apocalyptic bringing the death of the soul.

Despite the power of the internet to attract myths, it is probable that the most common technological apocalypse stories centre on robots or computers gaining more intelligence than us and wiping us out, or there being nuclear war, genetic catastrophe and so on. Climate change becomes part of this apocalyptic narrative, while the millennium bug is an example of an expected apocalypse being averted. These stories are 'real' myths: they tell us of the possible. In both cases, self-powered technology moves to 'end worlds', either through millennial 'advancement' and increasing control, or through apocalypse or decay.

## ***Technology as outside us, with its own imperatives***

With the idea that technology is both outside nature and a driving force in society, we place technology external to ourselves. Even Bernard Stiegler, who argues that humanity and technology are inseparable, makes technology the driving force so that "techno-genesis structurally precedes socio-genesis" and technology is "humanity's very destiny" (2009: 2). This assertion's only persuasiveness is the mythic background. If humanity and technology are truly inseparable then it is only the myth of technology's separation from 'nature', which makes it obvious that one of them must be prior *at this moment*. If human 'being' is insufficient and demands technology, then why is not technical 'being' also insufficient? There is no true inseparability if the 'human' is usurped by the 'technological'; that is simply a reversal in keeping with the myth and its counterpositions.

The externality of technology is not inevitable. For example European alchemy proceeds by assuming

that there is no division between the technological work involving apparatus, the human sphere and, for want of a better term, the divine/spiritual sphere. All resonate with each other so that changes in one bring changes in the other. In this kind of vision, the techno-world is alive and living *with* us (not against us, or apart from us, or dead) (Marshall 2002)<sup>6</sup>.

Perhaps this Western sense of technology as an exterior driving force arises from the way technology has been used against people, to extend power over others, usually without consultation, militarily and through work<sup>7</sup>. Through our modes of compelling work, we arrive at the mix of factory with the workhouse and prison (Jennings 1985: 23, 48). Technology becomes a compulsion to labour and hence an extension of management. Before industrialisation, there was a sense that a person could make their own tools, and command those tools. During industrialisation, tools became owned and controlled by the company, and technology became complicated and separate to a degree which renders it impossible, for most people, to build or repair, themselves; especially if it constantly changes. Technology became a form of, or tool of, imperialism; used to conquer the human, the home country and the external world in the name of trade. In the 19th Century, industrialism could be portrayed as an incarnation of hell, most famously with Blake's 'Dark Satanic Mills', and a case could be made that Hell is the first machine: Pandemonium (ibid: 3-5). In this situation, technology is easily seen as having an inimical life of its own, to which human life becomes subject or subordinate, an appendage – so the person appears mechanised rather than the technology humanised. Humans become an estranged part of the machine. As external and imposed, technology becomes concretised as knowledge, perception, and authority; and thus by psychological compensation comes to represent ignorance, deception and subversion. Technology both enables and restricts, and hence the possibility it bears of becoming millennium or apocalypse.

Imposed and enforced technology is a recurring narrative in the interviews. People report building up informal networks so as to get the job done, to receive help with the system, and to make up for the computer's inability to do the work, only to have those networks disrupted by managerial action or by another upgrade. Those interviewed almost unanimously report a sense that they were not consulted about changes to the IT that they used, which then changed their jobs. Indeed changes in IT were often seen, by them, as ways of deskilling staff, increasing workloads, or cutting their hours or numbers. IT was a form of warfare. It was relatively frequently reported that when there was a change in management, or ownership, that new software would be implemented without any prior research to find out what people actually did. Software, in this case, might act as a symbolic imprimatur of the change in control and of the subjugation of the controlled. Some might call this apocalypse; others who see it as cutting costs and making work more efficient, as a potential millennium.

---

<sup>6</sup> Alchemy also accepts chaos and disorder as forming a necessary part of the process at all levels, rather than attempting to make such disruptions marginal or suppressed – however, perhaps as a result of all these boundary crossings, it was almost impossible to teach alchemy and so it was easily superseded as a discourse by a more programmatic 'science' which did not recognise disorder.

<sup>7</sup> In the early modern West, one source of technical ingenuity was the torture devices made for the Inquisition.

Even when there was research into gathering what are called ‘requirements’, (i.e. what the new system is required to do) people would say that these requirements were not implemented, or the requirements were gathered from the wrong people, usually the managers rather than the workers. As one person said “It wasn’t about them coming to [us], finding out what our needs were, what we could do. It was about us fitting with their software. There is this thin veil of consultation, but it’s meaningless. It’s absolutely meaningless”. As some IT workers pointed out, gathering requirements adds to people’s work, which may make writing the software more expensive, and so a case can always be made for not gathering them fully. Others stated that attempts to explain to management what was needed, or what was wrong with the system could be fatal to job security.

Managers or programmers of software would frequently recommend downplaying potential changes, so that people did not panic, however this would simply leave people feeling they could not trust management, and open further problems in communication and in representing the organisation with any accuracy. It was also frequently reported that as managers did not use the systems they often had no idea how bad they were, and people did not know how to tell them. On the other hand people reported their suspicions that sometimes new IT systems resulted from one department or manager attempting to extend their influence, without regard for the organisation’s working or the fact that different departments had different aims or requirements.

The interviews suggest that there is a permanent level of confusion, sense of hidden agendas, and failure of information transfer within the workplace. Instead of order and easy efficiency, offices were murky pools of resentful and bewildered chaos. Fear of job loss adds to the levels of resentment. In these conditions, suspicion and paranoia intensify because the question of whether someone is trying to get at you with their use of software, or their requests or complaints about software, continually arises. Software installation can trigger previous conflicts, or become a focus for them (cf. Marshall & Zowghi 2010), again disrupting the already disrupted patterns of work. Even if the workplace is relatively harmonious then friction can arise because different groups have different evaluations of the importance of different actions and processes which are incorporated into the IT system.

This sense of paranoia and incompatibility between groups is furthered by the widespread use of management and ordering techniques which seem incompatible with the work that is supposed to be being managed, or which produce a sense of disorder in people’s lives. This is not simply that individual managers are incompetent, but the whole system is skewed towards incompetence, and disorder. If management generally has restructuring mania (moving people around, reorganising them and their work), which is anecdotally common, then it will disturb the workers and the ways things are done in the workspace. Some people tell me that this happens every couple of years in their workplace, not only disrupting work, changing the focus from production to reorganisation, but that it rarely if ever produces any improvement in work conditions and processes – and even if it did, those improvements will be lost in the next restructure.

This ongoing failure of management to work might be the repressed of our society. As we assume that things and processes need more order, and that order is good, the idea that we cannot manage and pro-

duce order is terrifying. This terror is then displaced on to the technology that management celebrates, and often uses as the excuse for rearranging everything.

So while computer technology has sometimes been promoted as ending the world of work and producing leisure (millennium), nowadays that technology seems devoted to the ends of work, to furthering the spread and demands of work, to making work total, and making work, and leisure, both exist within the machine. It is almost no longer possible to leave work, as you are simply a mobile phone call or an email away, and the computer screen always makes work available to us. If technology seems actively hostile, it is because it symbolises the displaced and harsh face of the managerial and capitalist imperative; imperatives which are only rarely escaped and which seem part of contemporary existence.

## ***Technology as alive***

It is a recurrent feature of modern Western world ending stories that 'life energy' gets caught in technology, as we have seen in Brockman's metaphor of Dr. Frankenstein<sup>8</sup>. The robots become alive, nuclear power becomes a repository of the energies of the occult, and so on (Weart 1988)<sup>9</sup>. This life is then directed against the human, in some kind of apocalyptic battle.

With machines experienced as a form of domination, we could posit that as we become more passive in the face of their arrival, the machine grows more alive, as if life was leached off into the machine. It is their connection to the supposedly impersonal life of the markets, to which human life must be sacrificed and managed in order to survive, which gives the machine its own impersonal but living aura. This impersonality perhaps spills into a related myth in which the living machine has, as its hallmark, lack of 'feeling'. Similarly, as the human approaches the machine they also lose feeling. For example, the 1960s Cybermen in *Dr. Who*, whose human parts are gradually replaced with machine parts until they were no longer truly human but machine and without emotion. Their only motive seems to be to engage in conquest of the human world. In the more recent episodes, the emotions are not removed with the body, but suppressed technologically by a chip. Again technology is seen as against emotions, and hence against what seems to be human. From the other way around, in *Terminator II*, as the Schwarznegger Terminator robot becomes more human it learns emotions and, of course it comes to protect us from the machine apocalypse in the

---

<sup>8</sup> According to Turkle several AI researchers at MIT come from families claiming to be descendants of Rabbi Leow who made the golem (1984: 260). For the association of electricity with life and divine power see Benz (1989).

<sup>9</sup> Weart suggests the investigation of, and reaction to, nuclear energy was influenced both by the properties of reality and by a preexisting set of supposedly subordinate myths which resembled those around alchemy. Thus it became associated with transmutation of metals (1988: 5, 13, 38, 56-8), transformation of the body (ibid: 36-8, 50-5, 191), production of utopia (ibid: 10-2, 173, 211), spiritually potent or destructive rays (ibid: 36, 45-7), the light and flame of godhead (41, 101-2), the energy of life (ibid: 37), the destruction and rebirth of the world (Armageddon) (ibid: 17-8, 101-2, 138-9, 222, 402) and the uncovering of dangerous and forbidden secrets. A related myth was of the mad scientist who not only uncovered what 'man-was-never-meant-to-know', but also displayed the inability of 'rationality' to cope with reality. The scientist and the secret should be contained (ibid: 21, 24, 31, 122-4, 187).

first place so it is separated out from the other machines<sup>10</sup>.

Examples of the machine as intelligence without emotions are almost endless. In this process, the machine becomes the image of the rational 'mythless' person, whose emotions are secondary to their work. What is being recognised is that without emotions the technology (and hence the economy and work) cannot be placated or swayed by normal human techniques of persuasion. Our technology, and our workplace, has no pity. "Care? No, why should I care?", says the first Cyberman to speak on Dr. Who.

CYBERMAN 1: Our life span was getting shorter so our scientists and doctors devised spare parts for our bodies until we could be almost completely replaced.

POLLY: But... that means you're not like us. You're robots!

CYBERMAN 1: Our brains are just like yours except that certain weaknesses have been removed.

BARCLAY: Weaknesses? What weaknesses?

CYBERMAN 1: You call them emotions, do you not?

POLLY: But... that's terrible! You... you mean you wouldn't care about someone in pain?

CYBERMAN 1: There would be no need. We do not feel pain

(Pedler 1966).

No mercy is to be expected. *Star Trek*, has similar creatures in the Borg, which as well as being without emotions, reflect an American horror of collectivism, as through assimilation the human becomes a devoted drone, an impersonal slave of the group or later of the 'queen' – which may emphasise the loss of 'masculine' freedom. This horror of collectivism is not so marked in the British version where Cybermen are not individuals either, but no one seems to particularly care.

In a counterpositionary movement, the lack of emotions and irrationality which supposedly give the machines their aggression and domination, usually prove to be their downfall. They are not capable of leaps of logic or strategy; the hope is that their minds are not as flexible or creative as our own, and we can still win – indeed in these stories the humans nearly always win. But in the workplace we are also dealing with humans as well as machines, and perhaps the hope is not grounded.

In yet another variant of the myth of life energy in the machine, it can be posited that humans can be downloaded into the machines and thus gain immortality and freedom from the body. This story is common in science fiction but is not just found there. Marvin Minsky, Professor of Science at MIT, wrote "if it was possible, I would have my self downloaded", and "evolution seems to be leading us to a machine consciousness" (q Springer 1996: 26). Hans Moravec, director of the Mobile Robot Lab at Carnegie-Mellon University describes four imagined procedures for transferring the mind into a machine. In most of these methods the process of replication destroys the original, so essentially the human dies so that a copy (or

---

<sup>10</sup> It is possible that the presence of emotions in the Schwarzneger's Terminator in *Terminator II*, is why people continually describe it as a cyborg, i.e. a modified human, when it is clearly meant to be a robot.

copies) of him or her can 'live'. The appeal of this idea is probably connected with the magical mechanisms of similarity and contagion as described by James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*. This version of the myth tends to ignore the fears about machines, although Moravec also concluded that we might be displaced by intelligent machines.

When technology represents an existential mystery, as when it seems to dictate or disturb life and what it is possible to do, or when its solutions produce further problems, then it will become the focus of myth. Symbolically within this apocalypse we are caught in something beyond ourselves and political action can become abrogated because it is seen as the nature of the technology, not the historical series of decisions, implementations and political victories, which causes the problem. Overwhelming and apparently unsolvable problems, such as destruction of the environment, or the pains of modern work, can appear inevitable.

## ***Technology, order and disorder***

In the course of this paper I have suggested that technology in the West and information technology in particular, open a mythic field. Technology is not an area of specific and dry 'rationality', but an area of hope and fear, bound together with apocalyptic and millennial myths. I have further suggested that the intertwining of technology with capitalism and conquest, and the ongoing failure of capitalist managerialism has had a significant effect on the way that technology has been thought about, in that it provides the basis for the intersection of technology as an ordering and disordering factor in people's lives, which is not experienced simply. This effect may be increased if people feel that order and disorder should be one thing or the other, binary opposites, rather than intertwined and self-disruptive.

In a subsequent paper, I will explore, in more depth, the technological disorder in its social rootedness, which has only been briefly hinted at here. In anticipation I will argue firstly, as Clastres (1987) suggests in another context, that if technology is a tool of domination, then 'disorder' arises from resistance. People try to subvert and disorganise technology, so as not to be organised by it or appear diminished by it, not to be immersed in it, or subject to it, to keep the social consubstantial with the personal. Given that technology is a form of organisation, it is likely to clash with existing orders, encounter both inertia and positive obstruction, or to be appropriated (where possible) for unintended personal, or sociable, usages.

The second cause of disorder arises through failure of humanly limited models of the world. Our models are rarely completely accurate and, as suggested in this paper, at least partially, mythical. There is no reason why people in power, or those who try to implement organisation through technology, should know more than others, about everything. Those near the top of hierarchies do not generally know what those at the bottom have to do to make the organisation work. Fear of punishment for disagreement, or rewards for agreeing with those above, mean that those lower in the hierarchy have no compelling reason to inform their superiors about the real state of affairs. In the other direction, the necessity of hiding managerial processes and weaknesses from those below, likewise hides what is really going on. Similar boundaries can exist between all kinds of groups, through secrecy, local idioms, tacit knowledge, misperceptions, fear and



so on. Indeed the models people have may be structured by the order of communication offered by their existing technology. The more rigorously these inaccurate models are applied, the more disordering they can become.

The information workplace is, then, not a place of accurate knowledge or exchange of information, or rational management, but of active misunderstanding, organisational chaos and informal recoveries and resistances. Rather than being built on trust as Giddens (1990) argues, it would seem that network society is based upon suspicion and paranoia – we cannot trust everyone, especially those who are not of our level or group in the organisation. We may ‘really’ be bound in long chains of interdependence, but it seems that our mythic consciousness tends to ignore, or deny, this.

The IT and managerial chaos described in this paper, leads us to look at Information Society theory, in terms not of the orders of society and of recognised working knowledge, but of it’s neglected, or repressed, others: the disorders of society, the ongoing failure of management and the actuality of knowledge being distorted, miscommunicated, ignored, or structured by myth, rivalry or survival. In the information society bad information drives out good, ordering generates disorder, and heavily restated ideology replaces the pragmatism it is supposed to express. In extending and intensifying the orders of work, technology disrupts those orders, so it might be suggested that as the networks of capitalism become all-encompassing they are being made more precarious and disruptive. As a result many people’s lives are embedded in confusion and uncertainty; they hope that technology will free them, but fear it will enslave them or lead them to disaster. They both embrace and resist technology, attempt to order by it and disorder it, and are disordered by it. They are caught in an order/disorder complex with no clear exit. This fosters the sense of being caught in some kind of trajectory or fate, which threatens life, regularity and so on. It also points out that the *ends* of society, the aims which it pursues, may directly lead to the disruption of that society and its possible *ending*.

People may say these consequences are trite compared to the endless destruction faced in despoiled or conquered societies, and that may be true, but it is real never the less. The “security, comfort and optimism” of the West is part of the millennial side of the myth, but true only for a relatively short time for most people; any security is intimately tied in with the complex of destruction and uncertainty. However, if anthropology is to deal with ends of worlds, then it cannot keep making it normal to ignore our own society, and the ways it functions in our own lives.

## ***References***

Benz, Ernst. 1989. *The Theology of Electricity: On the Encounter and Explanation of Theology and Science in the 17th and 18th Centuries*. Allison Park: Pickwick Publications.

Birkerts, Sven. 1994. *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate Of Reading in an Electronic Age*. Boston: Faber.

Brand, Stewart. 1996. The Scout, in Brockman 1996.

- Brockman, John. 1996. (ed.) *Digerati: Encounters with the Cyber Elite*. London: Orion Business Books.
2010. *The Collective Conscious*, The World Question Centre: How has the Internet Changed the Way you Think?. [http://www.edge.org/q2010/q10\\_1.html](http://www.edge.org/q2010/q10_1.html)
- Bunnell, David. 1996. The Seer, in Brockman 1996.
- Cartwright, Darren. 2010. *Bank of Queensland's Eftpos terminals go down costing retailers thousands*, AAP January 3.
- Clastres, Pierre. 1987. *Society Against the State*. NY: Zone Books.
- Dudley, L.M. 1991. *The Word and the Sword*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Eisendrath, Craig . 2003. *At War With Time: Western Thought from The Sages to the 21st Century*. Allworth Press
- El Emam, K. & Koru, A.G. 2008. A Replicated Survey of IT Software Project Failures, *IEEE Software*, 25(5): 84-90.
- Epstein, D.L., Bates, R., Goldstone, J., Kristensen, I., O'Halloran, S. 2006. Democratic Transition, *American Journal of Political Science*, 50(3): 551–569.
- Gates, Bill. 1995. *The Road Ahead*. NY: Viking.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1990. *Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford UP.
- Gingrich, Newt. 1995. *To Renew America*. NY: Harper Collins.
- Graeber, David. 2004. *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago.
- Hardt, M. & Negri, A. 2004. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. NY: Penguin Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1977. *The Question Concerning Technology*, in David Krell (ed) Heidegger, Basic Writings. NY HarperCollins Publishers.
- Huber, N. 2003. Hitting targets? The State of UK IT Project Management, *Computer Weekly*, 4th November: 22-4.
- Hughes, Glenn. 1993. *Mystery and Myth in the Philosophy of Eric Voegelin*. Missouri UP.
- Hulme, Mike. 2009. *Why we Disagree about Climate Change*. Cambridge UP.
- Innis, Harold. 1950. *Empire and Communications*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Jennings, Humphrey. 1985. *Pandemonium: the Coming of the Machine*. London: Andre Deutsch.
- Knox, H., O'Doherty, D., Vurdubakis, T., & Westrup, C. 2007. Transformative capacity, information technology, and the making of business 'experts', *The Sociological Review*, 55(1): 23-41.

Lenin, V.I. 1965. *Collected Works*, Vol 31. Moscow: Progress Publishers.

Levy-Bruhl, L. 1975. *The Notebooks on Primitive Mentality*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1926. *Myth in Primitive Psychology*. NY: WW Norton.

Marshall, Jon. 2002. *Jung Alchemy and History*. Glasgow: Hermetic Research.

# Without Ends Facing The End: Of Atztecs Revivalists and Anthropologists

*Sebastian Job*  
*University of Sydney*

*Shall we wait to see whether this culture will recover of itself,  
in the chance play of forces, which create and destroy values? Husserl, 1923*

## **Abstract**

This paper opens a discussion of anthropology's relationship to mythic practices endeavouring to bring contemporary urbanites into a more harmonious relationship with the natural world. I give a summary account of one such mythic practice, the dance of the contemporary *danzantes* (popularly known as *Los Concheros*) of Mexico City. My argument will be that the *danzantes* (no doubt like many others), can help us to better grasp that the present ecological crisis is just as much an existential and metaphysical crisis, and that if an epochal shift in its relation to nature is on the cards for modern or postmodern society, an epochal shift in our thinking about reality is on the cards for the social sciences. In anthropology, however, this metaphysical shift is yet to come properly into view. Its necessity may be obscurely felt, but words have not been found. This paper is an attempt to evoke that necessity and to point in a likely direction. Beginning with a sketch of much of contemporary anthropology's bamboozlement in the face of a sharpened existential predicament, it does no more than attempt to suggest that there could be an end to at least the present version of that bamboozlement.

**Keywords:** Mexico, *danzantes*, anthropology, myth, alienation, environment, reality, universal, metaphysics, apocalypse

**I**

How will anthropology, as a mode of thought and a practice of teaching, be affected by the ongoing degradation of the biosphere? Or to put the matter the other way around: how, as anthropologists, to develop an authentic response to the escalating destruction of animals and plants, of water, soil and air? What relationship exists between our own research and teaching and a modern human destructiveness of such proportions and rapidity that it seems to be breaking free of the regenerative circuits which hitherto brought new life from death?

Anxieties about the global economic, military, demographic, ecological, and “food security” situation testify to the accuracy of at least this in “globalisation” theory: for many populations “the global” is consolidating as a distinct psychological presence, and often a threatening presence. The global appears as a universal condition, that is, as a complex process gathering together or universalising all human fates. Actions as humdrum as turning on a tap or catching a fish are increasingly revealed within this universal horizon, and the horizon is closing in. One indication here is that scenarios of total ruin are now, or again, a cultural staple in the West. Haunted by socio-political impotence we are becoming transfixed by presentiments of a terrible end. But in the current rash of apocalyptic imaginings in films, computer games, novels and everyday conversation, there is no doubt disguised the longing for a *good end*. That is, a longing for a good collective end or purpose which would be the resolution to this looming bad end to the human story.

Yet this longing for a good universal, for a good collective end or direction for current human existence, does it not answer to an objective necessity? Notwithstanding our diversity, if we don’t diagnose the overarching forms of insanity and stumble through to saner ways of organizing ourselves, will we not do away with ourselves? It is to these questions, and to the challenges they generate for anthropology, that this essay is turned.

Sanity or death-bound normality: Such, apparently, are the choices. Yet however compelling, this doesn’t sound like an anthropological judgement; and when I consider how anthropologists might approach these issues, I notice how quickly it becomes difficult to get anywhere. Thought splits this way and that and every means of advance seems blocked. Ethnographic explorations of “sanity” make the necessary trip into culturally divergent conceptions of mental health, while generally failing to return with critical tools for global self-diagnosis (Marsella and White 1982). The very idea of an “authentic” relation to anything at all seems naïve to many anthropologists. It relies, it will be said, on an impossible ideal of self-mastery, or on some dubious ascription of a pre-existing collective or individual essence. “Humanity” is employed as a rhetorical word but rarely as an analytical concept. As for a “good” social goal or direction for humanity, well it might be desirable, but what business would an anthropologist have with defining it?

It should be emphasised that in highlighting these rifts I am speaking to what I think is the overall situation in today’s anthropology and, to my knowledge, the other social sciences. A judicious appraisal of the far-sighted contributions of pioneering thinkers – always more plentiful than dark moods allow – belongs elsewhere. How then to get a handle on these conceptual rifts and the way they undermine even a preliminary clarification of anthropology’s relation to our times?

If anthropological thought tends to shatter at the posing of the problematic of sane, or good, or authentic human ends, this is not only due to the inherent complexity of the problem. My feeling is that one way or another the conceptual fragmentation we rehearse in so many discussions and forums feeds off and in turn reinforces a more basic split. This is a split within ourselves, between our situation as

humans, that is, our existential situation now standing out to us within its tenuous global horizon, and our socially reinforced understandings of our cognitive duties as anthropologists. It is a split, if you like, between current life experience and inherited modes of cognition. And it is this split between life experience and cognition which generates the splits within cognition. In my view, if we cannot see our way towards healing this existential-cognitive split within ourselves, anthropology will fail to contribute to the self-clarification of our common human situation. Worse, anthropology will maintain itself in an unconsciously perverse relation to the human end.

Let me illustrate by way of anecdote: The present Symposium was preceded by a reading group that met regularly and sometimes, I think it fair to say, provided evidence of this perversity. In the meetings of the reading group the idea was expressed that our task as anthropologists, in so far as we concern ourselves with these gloomy matters at all, is not to study the threat to humanity, but rather to study *how other humans respond* to the threats that they perceive to humanity. By its mode of delivery it was clear that this second-order or professionally distanced approach took itself to be comfortably orthodox. Like any orthodoxy it felt affronted at being questioned. But questions were bound to arise, if only in the readings themselves. For example, in one text we considered, Masco's ethnography of the US nuclear weapons industry, Walter Benjamin was quoted appraising the Italian Futurists and their aestheticising celebration of war. Writing in the mid 1930s, Benjamin remarked on the "self-alienation" of European society, which "has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (in Masco 2006: 98). Now adhering to the bitter end to a program of studying not the planetary crisis itself but rather only and merely how other humans respond to their perception of the planetary crisis – would this not be a parallel instance of the same "self-alienation"? Would it not be to assume the posture of thinkers whose professional form of self-consciousness is one of fantasising ourselves as squatting outside the world, watching as, perhaps, it burns? Let us put this in terms of the problematic of "interpretation". "The essential vocation of interpretive anthropology", Clifford Geertz argued, "is not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said" (Geertz 1973: 30). But why should the "consultable record of what man has said" not be brought to bear on "our deepest questions"?! In that negation we should discern, I think, philosophical helplessness dressed as sober self-limitation. And we will increasingly discern it as such the more our ears are unable to block out a world forcing its "deepest questions" upon us.

The attitude that anthropology is only about interpreting the interpretations of others must issue in a radical split within the personality of the anthropologist whenever they deal with well-founded interpretations concerning a menacing reality that envelops the anthropologist as well. As a "private citizen", as one colleague argued, I may be worried about the ecological crisis and may even become politically active, yet as a "professional anthropologist" I have no truck with "what really matters" or "how things really are". I carry on teaching and researching as if I am equally agnostic about all totalising interpretations. To add something to human understanding of what is really going on at this universal level would be outside my competence. And to speak of the meaning or human import of global changes would be



too metaphysical a stance anyway.

Yet if it were ever possible in more restricted contexts, confining ourselves to interpretations of other people's interpretations of their experience also carries an *intellectual* cost where the relevant context becomes, in some way, "planetary". This for two reasons at least. On the one hand, the multifarious forms of cultural, political, psychological and ideological reaction to the world situation can only be understood by trying to understand the *real nature* of the crisis they are reacting to. To be sure, we frequently need to suspend judgement as to the veracity of people's ideas in order to give ourselves over to understanding those ideas themselves. This is essential. But the etic truth-status of claims that "the forests are disappearing" or "they pay us nothing" or "most of our young people suffer depression" cannot be permanently suspended. Our understanding of such claims hangs partly on our sense of their place in the mental life of the person concerned. Were they arrived at through reading signs and portents, speaking to invisible spirits, leaning on locally authoritative sources, partaking in events, carrying out tests, being on the receiving end of violence, going hungry, engaging in rituals, or reading blogs? Efforts to understand "what is really going on" are therefore ineliminable, that is, if the co-efficient of fantasy, impish desire, bad faith and wilful ignorance in the person's "interpretation" is to be estimated. And it *will* be estimated, say so or not.

Put otherwise, the familiar "realist" riposte to "symbolic" or "postmodern" anthropology is hardening. It is not just that the interpretation of others' interpretations of the world always takes place against the horizon of a taken for granted picture of the real world; it is that the background picture of the real world which previously served as the implicit horizon for interpreting interpretations can, in unprecedented ways, no longer be taken for granted. The animals are dying out, friends, and that will not let itself be ignored. Or: the more it is ignored, the higher the co-efficient of fantasy, impish desire, bad faith, and wilful ignorance in our anthropology.

On the other hand, epistemic "realism" (its sights set on what it conceives as objective truth) also comes up short. All the forms of cultural interpretation and reaction to the planetary crisis are themselves intrinsic elements of that crisis. The "real nature" of our global situation cannot be properly known as a purely techno-scientific object. It is not, for example, simply an object of ecological science. Nor is it any other kind of external object available to a purely "objective" or "etic" analysis. It is equally a mounting crisis of human being, of human relations, institutions, interests and self-understandings. Cultural dynamics are in most cases antecedent causes of the "natural" threats cultures react to. The same goes for academic practice and the institutions that support it. It seems plausible, for instance, that the culturally authoritative ideals of value neutrality and descriptive objectivity in the social sciences belong not only to the cure but to the disease, for if the price paid for pursuing this kind of knowledge is that the question of *true human ends* must always fall outside of the truths that the human sciences can consider, then the price is too high.

In short, the global crisis is real enough, and the social sciences will add to its understanding, or it will not be understood, let alone resolved, at all. But as the social sciences tackle this new environment

they will in turn be changed. In trying to understand the empirical dimensions of the crisis (what is really going on inclusive of how various interpretations are caught up in, or point beyond, what is going on), social scientists will confront, again and again, the properly “metaphysical” question of human being as it reveals itself in the light of the human good.

What does this mean? It means that there is nothing for it but for social scientists to chance their hands at suggesting what among the many different human cultural reactions appears merely symptomatic of a death-bound condition, and what in those reactions might be creative, healthy and sane. It may be objected that this is a job for moral philosophers or political activists, not for anthropologists. The point is that *as humans* each of us *will* make such judgements. To not be able to make them also *as anthropologists* is to wind back in the self-blinded and alienated condition (the cognitive-existential split of “professional academic” versus “private citizen”) we have just been examining.

The preliminary intellectual task, then, would seem to be this: to think our way beyond this split condition in a form that would also represent an *enrichment* of anthropology as an empirical science, rather than an abandonment of that empirical project for an ungrounded or merely wishful metaphysics, or just for worried moral wing-flapping.

## //

One of the major resources for engaging this difficult issue, I want to argue, is the universe of myth. In other words, I propose to take here the risk that many anthropologists have taken, despite criticism from within and without: that of appearing to give too much credence to the interpretations of their usually non-scientific, non-western informants. A few words, then, about the “Mexica” dancers in contemporary Mexico. Not because the *danzantes* could offer anybody an alternative “science of the concrete” (despite some of their self-understandings, I don’t think their ideas fall within even Levi-Strauss’ generous idea of “science”), but rather because their mythic practice is a self-conscious attempt to embody an experience of non-alienated reality.

The contemporary Mexica *danzantes* are an urban mestizo movement which I began to study for the first time from January to March 2009. The movement, which in its current form dates back some thirty years, is organised into *calpullis* or dance groups. I studied the main parent *calpulli* in Mexico City, called *Zemanauk*. Some of the pertinent features of the dancers’ experience as they generally interpret it can be summarised in the following way:

- 1) What surrounds them, especially in the city, is materialism, political corruption, moral decay and the heteronomy of the Mexicans, who are externally dominated by the US, and who are neither authentically themselves nor successfully anybody else. This condition they will sometimes refer to dismissively or sadly as *una porqueria*, a pigsty, or un *desmadre*, a disorderly disgrace.
- 2) The dance is a sacred ritual. Its presupposition and primary concern is evocation of the sacred

or non-mundane experience that *todo es todo* (all is all). This experience of transcendent and immanent order is achieved by numerous means, principal among which is the carrying through of movements which replicate or instantiate the duality and quaternity of the world. Here, for instance, we find *ollin*, the interwoven cross, or its dynamically stabilised variant, the quincunx or primordial centred quaternity sometimes known as the Cross of Quetzalcoatl (Sejourne 1978: 95-97). Each grouping of steps of the dance, each evocation of the four cardinal directions, each star jump, each rotation about an axis, each instance of bodies interweaving from opposite directions, is a human microcosmic instance of this macrocosmic inter-relation of *ollin*, of the cross or diamond, this five that is four-in-one, or, more abstractly, this one that is two – and then four and then many – which is venerated as *Ometeotl*, Divine-Energetic Duality.

3) As much a temporal as a spatial totality, *ollin* is the Fifth Sun or Age of the Aztecs. At the same time its veneration now is preparation for the coming of the Sixth Sun, the Age which, coterminous with the Mayan 2012, is being ushered in as we speak (Calpulli Nexticpac de Anahuac 2001).

4) The cosmos is an energetic totality. It does not know stillness. *Ollin* means movement or earthquake and is related to *yollotl* (heart). The sound of the drums of the dance is the heartbeat of *Tonatzin*, Mother Earth. To dance is to engage in an energetic exchange with the Earth-Cosmos, whose rhythm is felt as the beating of one's own heart.

5) The dance is a form of "retro-alimentation", where the dancers give back to the Earth and the Sun, and in which they venerate the grandparents, the ancestors, as the life-givers. *Ometeotl* is also *El Dador de la Vida*, the Giver of Life, and the dance is a "sacrifice" of time, energy and "normal life" which gives back to those – the ancestors, the plants, the animals, the water, the Earth, the Sun, the Cosmos – who gave us life.

6) In return the dancers receive back more energy than they expended. After an arduous four hours dancing they are usually elated, and proud that they are elated. The cosmos shines on them, sends them signs in their lives and satisfies their needs. They know their place. They are connected to, sometimes embodiments of, the ancestors. They feel themselves well-rooted in tradition. They learn, they say, who they truly are. They are no longer lost. They can offer spiritual guidance to Mexico. They are part of that worldwide spiritual and anti-imperialist renewal that is returning to the non-western traditions; that renewal which the suffering Earth is waiting for.

7) The dancers are *guerreros* and *guerreras* (warriors). This requires much discipline and is about self-transcendence. It is not about external violence, but on the contrary about overcoming one's egoism and negative emotions, and strengthening one's will so as to be like *Huitzilopochtli* the warrior god of the sun, or like the women who heroically die in childbirth. To be a genuine *guerrero* or *guerrera* is to overcome one's pettiness so as to offer oneself wholeheartedly to the dance, and therewith to the cosmos.

### III

One explanatory approach to the *danzantes* and their Aztec revivalism would be to place them in terms of other neo-traditionalist nativist movements. Let us note in passing the historical dubiousness of The idea of a Sixth Sun; the self-deception involved in the near-universal opinion among the *danzantes* that the Aztecs did not sacrifice humans; the oddity of contemporary, primarily non-Indigenous city dwellers finding

existential security in an appeal to the chronically insecure Aztec cosmos. For these and other reasons we would be fully justified in speaking, once again, of the “invention of tradition”.<sup>1</sup> But I want rather to pursue a different type of question; namely whether, in and through the mythic cast of their thought, the *danzantes* have something to teach anthropologists about how they should think about the state of the world.

This is a question which arose forcefully for me during repeated discussions with a painter by the name of Miguel Suazo. A handsome 62 year old man who came from extremely humble origins in the countryside, Miguel had the exceptional position of pipe player with the dancers. Proud of having chosen his own path in life, he became a successful artist in the Mexican school of abstract expressionism. In his youth, he told me, he won a major national art prize, but was denied the prize because he refused to be a toy boy for any of the influential female gallery owners. He voluntarily exiled himself from the art world and its fakery, went through a major existential shakeup, and wound up in a tiny one-room apartment with barely space for a single mattress. This is where he was living when I met him. He painted on the roof and kept his considerable collection of unsold paintings in an adjacent storage room.

Miguel is convinced that only art can save the world. In making authentic art, whether that be music, dancing or painting, we not only interpret but feel the essence of our relation to things, an essence which is both of that very moment, and cosmic-eternal. This essence is a dynamic current running between ourselves and the object we interpret. Seeing in the Aztecs a kind of agrarian socialism, he looked forward to the overthrow of capitalism on the basis of the felt sense of the power of original culture, of essential roots, of veneration of the ancestors, of the presence of the cosmos. As he said to me raising his hands and visibly inspired after a long dance in the majestic surrounds of ancient Teotihuacan, “Feel the space, how the sky rises like the wind over us, like a cupola.” That day he was satisfied the dance had successfully embodied the essential reality, the living cosmic energy, contact with which is the only basis for a life not deluded or wasted.

However the dance was not always so rewarding. On the day of the March equinox in 2009 we walked to what we knew to be a deliberately unauthorized ritual performance of the dance in the main Zocalo of Mexico City. Miguel’s mood soured when he discovered he’d mixed up the times of the dance, so that we arrived to find no one else there. I could see that Miguel, who was dressed in his finery and who had brought his instruments and wooden chair, felt humiliated. Unwilling to accept the mistake he’d made about the hour of the dance, he instead went into a particularly sharp diatribe about the other dancers, about how they understood nothing, how they had no dedication, were not true *guerreros*, and were only concerned with their own stomachs. Going further than usual, he equated them with the *Chimaleros*, those who earn money performing the dance for tourists. He had warned the *danzantes*, he said, to ban the taking of photos, but they hadn’t listened. They had let vanity poison the dance.

---

<sup>1</sup> The most recent and thorough treatment of a closely related Mexican dance group is the ethnography of *Los Concheros* by Susanna Rostas (Rostas 2009).

What he was most concerned about was that the dancers not be absorbed back into the capitalist *porqueria*, the pigsty of lostness, ignorance, submission and inauthenticity of the urban culture. But at this moment he seemed crestfallen, swamped. “Everything”, he announced, “is fucked”. “The economy is destroyed”. He pointed to a bicycle and said that it was “cold”. It was mass produced far away in China. The person who rides it has no living connection to it. He contrasted this to the “heat” in the wooden drum I carried for him, and which, together with flute and chair, he had hand-carved himself. Later, on the train, he challenged a boy who was peddling some kind of business books to reveal whether he could read. The boy looked embarrassed. Miguel shouted at him to go to school and learn to read proper books. In a cafe we talked about the need for revolution and the merits of Che Guevara, the Cuban model, and the Zapatistas. He sneered at my taking notes, and implied that none of this was genuinely important to me, that he and the dancers and Mexico’s troubles were just material for building my anthropological career. He insisted I put my notebook away and be “present”.

## IV

I found Miguel’s despairing sense of alienation compelling. I think this was because it brought to the foreground exactly the challenge I take anthropology to be facing due, among other things, to credible evidence of irreversible degradation of the biosphere. The scene for this challenge is here the universe of myth. Miguel and his fellow *danzantes* invoke *Huitzilopochtli*, *Quetzalcoatl*, *Tonatzin*, *Xipe Totec*, *Tezcatlipoca*, and numerous other personified powers or energies or gods as if they were attributes of the cosmos. Reality grasped as an energetic totality of this kind is reality which no longer stands apart or outside. It infinitely transcends them yet is intimately their own, is *felt* as their own. That, at least, is the aim.

Now the explanatory canons of anthropology generally refer mythic and ritualistic phenomena like this to intra-cultural, or intra-psychic, or archetypal, or symbolic, or socio-historical structures and contexts. In other words, the presumption of participants to be in relation to transcendent or otherwise sacred realities is suspended. These beliefs are germane to native experience, but they form no part of anthropological explanation. The mythic or religious presumptions of participants refer to non-empirical (inaudible, invisible) realms about which the anthropologist has no special knowledge, and about which it is best to be silent. This agnosticism seems the only neutral way to proceed.

Others, with a more scientific and atheistic cast of mind, may insist privately or publicly that the participants’ mythic self-understandings are outright delusory. This was the approach, for instance, of Marvin Harris, who in his reconstruction of the logic of Aztec human sacrifice preferred his etic explanation concerning protein deficits in the Mexican Valley to indigenous self-mystifications about aiding the Sun in its nightly battle with the gods of the underworld (Harris 1978).

Against Harris’s scientific cultural materialism, it can be observed that although we might well be able to distinguish between less and more plausible mythic claims, this cannot be simply done by reference to

an empirical and/or scientific standard, not if what is at issue is also the plausibility of claims about *proper human ends*. Meanwhile, the fact that science might have had little to say on the subject can no longer be taken as an indication of superiority.

A further observation is that we never exactly get outside of myth, least of all when we forget how much science owes to it. This, I think, is the position put forward by Jon Marshall in these proceedings (Marshall 2010). With equal justice this point about myth can be extended to speak of the ubiquitous presence of the imagination, of fantasies, or of archetypes, within forms of rationality which take themselves to be simply free of such dimensions. This applies to the ecological sciences as a human product as much as any other.

As far as it goes, this last approach seems the most promising. From a perspective that pays attention not only to myth as such but to the background infrastructure of the archetypal imagination, we might validly point out, for example, that Walter Benjamin is fishing in deep psychological waters when he speaks of the aestheticisation of our own collective destruction. Perverse responses to such a prospect are most likely more than just side-effects of “self-alienation”. If it is true that Gramscian “morbid symptoms” are now proliferating, it seems probable that contemporary self-alienation is bound up with a psycho-social death-drive masquerading as the resolution of alienation. That is to say, aestheticised or shoulder-shrugging or otherwise nihilistic stances towards collective extermination are most probably unconsciously seduced by a mythic return to self; a kind of omnipotent self-closure where alienation is subjectively overcome because we anticipate ourselves as alive not just beyond the moment of our own deaths (as with so many suicide notes), but beyond the unique moment of the death of the human race itself.

All the same, suppose we gathered enough materials to diagnose the contemporary fascination with the apocalypse as caught in the coils of this kind of narcissistic fantasy – would this diagnosis grasp our situation radically enough? Or would it repeat the standard secular or agnostic “bracketing” of the realm of ultimate or cosmic significance? Let us put that more pointedly: would this “archetypal” analysis ultimately be anything more than a second-order instance of what it is analysing; that is, would it be anything more than a sophisticated way for a human to milk some bitter satisfaction, as if from some immortal “elsewhere”, from contemplating humanity’s mortality? In short, an archetypal or mythic approach like this is crucial, but not if it becomes what it usually becomes: yet another way in which social scientific knowledge deafens itself to exactly that dimension which a voice like Miguel’s is feverishly trying to draw its attention to – namely, the need to understand and experience ourselves not as trapped outside the world looking on, but as beings whose essence and end is the world itself.

This idea, that we, even when we are anthropologists, are beings whose essence and end is the world itself, seems to offer a way of conceiving ourselves beyond the split between our existential situation as humans caught in a mortal social order, and ourselves as anthropological knowers. Or at least it might if it could be cashed out in non-mythological terms. Can it? I think it probably can. I think as a proposal it can be made an object of rational discussion, empirical validation and disputation, where that discussion, empirical validation and disputation is invited to understand itself as part of humanity’s search for a more authen-



tic relation to itself.

Put otherwise, social scientists have more epistemological options than they usually suppose. Interpretations, whether mythic or scientific, are not simply a medium that either allows us local and fallible engagement with “reality” (the realist or pragmatist assumption), or forever gets between us and unreachable “reality”, where “reality as such” is conceived as some wholly pre-interpretive beyond (the Kantian assumption). But nor is reality reducible to interpretations, so that all we ever deal with are social or discursive or archetypal or mythical “constructions” (the post-Kantian or Nietzschean-historicist assumption in its many variants). Despite their opposition to each other, these apparently reasonable or non-dogmatic viewpoints take for granted the dogma, typically modern, that thought and reality, and with it the good and being, are fundamentally divergent.

What if, rather, we took a cue from the unjustly traduced German Idealists and regarded reality less as an impossible object and more like the Subject to which our thought about it inescapably belongs?<sup>2</sup> In that case our culturally organised lives would belong to the life of reality. Our destructiveness and creativeness would be forms of the destruction and creation proper to reality. Our insightful interpretations and our obtuse delusions would arise from and belong to reality, would be part of reality’s ongoing self-division and self-synthesis. As such, some interpretations might bring reality to greater self-knowledge, greater thoughtfulness and care for itself, they might, that is, be part of overcoming a self-alienation which is ours because it is reality’s own self-alienation. Other interpretations might lead it further into hostile splits, self-blindness, exploitation and the repetitive circuits of capitalism’s resource munching death-drive. To be able to tell the one from the other would not immediately become any easier on account of adopting this standpoint, but reality *qua* subject is reality to which good ends are intrinsically important. Notwithstanding cultural diversity and aspects of moral incommensurability, telling the good from the bad therefore becomes intrinsically plausible, and something that, in and through us, reality owes to itself.

My suggestion, then, is not that anthropologists should all switch topics and rush to investigate the social dimensions of the planetary crisis. Nor am I saying that an awareness of our dire ecological situation must become omnipresent in our minds. I wouldn’t wish that on anyone. Nor am I saying that we should abandon anthropology to become activists putting out ecological fires – a departure which would leave anthropology as it is. I am rather suggesting that the planetary crisis, of which the ecological situation is one major component, will increasingly force us to suffer the split between our inherited social scientific conceptions and our existential situation, and that only a profound metaphysical shift, a shift in the basic coordinates of our “reality principle”, has any hope of healing that split. If this new sense of reality is to address our crisis it will necessarily weave new relations between humanity’s diverse ideas of what is and what is good, and therewith our understandings of human ends and the ends, in all senses, of the world. As anthropologists, that is, as teachers, students and erstwhile contributors to human culture, attempting that re-weaving would be one of the best ways to help humanity edge closer to becoming master of the situation it has created. It might also be a way of insisting on some personal sanity.

---

<sup>2</sup> A more developed treatment of these ideas, with particular reference to G.W.F. Hegel, can found in the essay ‘Human Sciences at the Edge of Panentheism’ (Job 2011, forthcoming).

## **References**

- Calpulli Nexticpac de Anahuac. 2001. *'Nuestros Soles, Nuestra Fuerza Cosmica: Documento de Esclarecimiento Historico Autoctono'*. No publication details.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *'The Interpretation of Cultures'*. New York: Basic Books.
- Harris, Marvin. 1978. *'Cannibals and Kings: The Origins Of Culture'*. London: Collins.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1981 [1923]. *'Renewal: Its Problem and Method'*, in Peter McCormick and Frederick A. Elliston (eds.). *'Husserl, Shorter Works'*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Job, Sebastian. 2011 (forthcoming). *'Human Sciences at the Edge of Panentheism: God and the Limits of Ontological Realism'*. in Mervyn Hartwig and Jamie Morgan (eds.). *'Theism, Atheism and Meta-Reality: Critical Realist Perspectives on Spirituality'*. Routledge.
- Marsella, Anthony J., White, Geoffrey M. 1982. *'Cultural Conceptions of Mental Health and Therapy'*. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company.
- Marshall, Jonathan. 2010. *'Technology, Disorder and the Ends of Work'*. Online proceedings of the symposium *'Anthropology and the Ends of Worlds'*, University of Sydney 25./26. March 2010. Sydney. <http://anthroendsofworlds.wordpress.com>.
- Masco, Joseph. 2006. *'The Nuclear Borderlands: The Manhattan Project in Post-Cold War'*. New Mexico. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Rostas, Susanna. 2009. *'Carrying the Word: The Concheros Dance in Mexico City'*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado
- Sejourne, Lurette. 1957. *'Burning Water: Thought and Religion in Ancient Mexico'*. Guildford, Surrey: Thames and Hudson.

# ***Panel 5***

## ***Aboriginal Ends***

***(Fri 26/03/2010; 2.30-3.00am)***

### **Perpetual Ends and Perpetual Beginnings: Temporalities of Indigeneity in Australia**

***Emma Kowal***  
***University of Melbourne***

#### ***Abstract***

The beginning of colonisation was the beginning of the end of Indigenous cultures. They have been in a perpetual state of ending ever since. From the nineteenth century to the present, every generation, in some part of the country has been proclaimed the last holders of classical Indigenous culture. Theories of the end of culture have ranged from social evolution to assimilation, while a counter-discourse of continuity and self-determination contests the notion that culture is ending. But there is complete agreement over what is ending or will never end: the 'oldest living culture' in the world. This paper will explore the strange temporality of Indigeneity within the settler-colonial imaginary. Fabian and others have demonstrated the ways that 'anthropological time' produced a secularised, naturalised and spatialised temporality of the 'primitive' who by definition has no future. Through the anthropomorphising of culture and the culturalisation of individuals, the Indigenous person/culture becomes the 40,000 year history of human occupation of the continent. The paper explores the manifestations of this thinking among white anti-racists concerned with why Indigenous lives end too soon. Drawing on an ethnography of non-Indigenous people working in Indigenous health in the Northern Territory, I show how there is a kind of cultural Lamarckianism in operation. Western individuals are seen to inherit the cumulative cultural knowledge, acquired over centuries, of germ theory and responsible alcohol consumption. By contrast, Indigenous people are seen to struggle with banking and infectious diseases because they have not had sufficient time to develop the appropriate cultural knowledge. Practices common to Indigenous communities over three generations, such as petrol sniffing, are seen as eternally new. The melding of culture, time and Aboriginal personhood produces both the perpetual ending of Indigeneity and the perpetual newness of modernity.

**Keywords:** Time, Indigenous, health, culture, Australia, anti-racist, white Introduction

## **Introduction**

The beginning of colonisation was the beginning of the end of Indigenous cultures. They have been in a perpetual state of ending ever since. From the nineteenth century to the present, every generation has been proclaimed as the last holders of classical Indigenous culture. Theories of the end of culture have ranged from social evolution to assimilation, while a counter-discourse of continuity and self-determination contests the notion that culture is ending. But there is complete agreement over what is ending or will never end: the oldest living culture in the world.

This paper will explore the strange temporality of Indigeneity within the settler-colonial imaginary. Fabian and others have demonstrated the ways that ‘anthropological time’ produced a secularised, naturalised and spatialised temporality of the ‘primitive’ who by definition has no future. Drawing on ethnography of non-Indigenous people working in Indigenous health in the Northern Territory, I explore the manifestations of this thinking among white anti-racists concerned with why Indigenous lives end too soon. The white people in question were employees at the pseudonymous Darwin Institute of Indigenous Health, a research institute that aims to improve the appalling state of Indigenous health through high-quality public health research in a range of areas including cardiovascular disease, infectious diseases, alcohol and drug use and mental health. The group I call ‘white anti-racists’ consists of men and women who largely identified as white, grew up and received university degrees in the health professions in southern capitals of Australia, and moved to Darwin with the intention of using their education and skills to improve the lot of the nation’s most disadvantaged group<sup>1</sup>.

While the individual viewpoints of each white anti-racist varied, most converged around a set of beliefs I call ‘postcolonial logic’. As I have explained elsewhere, “[f]undamental aspects of postcolonial logic include the belief that “Indigenous culture” has been maintained for thousands of years and is perhaps the “oldest” culture in the world; that Indigenous people have a unique relationship to the land and a complex social system; that their culture is in some ways superior to Western culture and has been severely decimated by colonization; that their current problems stem from dispossession, displacement, racism, and intergenerational trauma; and that the Australian people and their government must accept responsibility for the injuries inflicted on Indigenous peoples and cultures and invest more resources in Indigenous programs. A commitment to Aboriginal self-determination is a key part of postcolonial logic: a belief that Indigenous people must be in control of efforts to improve their lives, with non-Indigenous people and the state providing adequate support.” (Kowal 2008:341). In that article, I go on to analyse the tension at the heart of postcolonial logic between ‘remedialism’, impulse to ‘close the gap’ and strive towards statistical equality

---

<sup>1</sup> This ethnography was conducted in 2004-5 and received ethical approval from Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services Human Research Ethics Committee (Reference 03/28). Note that I also identify with the group studied, as a medical doctor who worked in Indigenous clinical medicine and health research in the Northern Territory prior to beginning the ethnography discussed here. In this way I am a ‘native ethnographer’, studying my own social group.

for Indigenous people, and ‘orientalism’, the need to maintain an opposition between indigeneity and the west. Much discourse in indigenous affairs can be understood as attempts to manage the tension between equality and difference: between effecting improvement and maintaining distinctiveness.

In this paper, I explore some temporal mechanisms at work within postcolonial logic. I show how a temporal iteration of orientalism characterised by Fabian as ‘anthropological time’ both complicates and sustains white anti-racist discourses of indigenous improvement. In effect, there is a kind of cultural Lamarckianism in operation. Western individuals are seen to inherit the cumulative cultural knowledge, acquired over centuries, of germ theory and responsible alcohol consumption. By contrast, Indigenous people are seen to struggle with banking and infectious diseases because they have not had sufficient time to develop the appropriate cultural knowledge. Practices common to Indigenous communities over three generations, such as petrol sniffing, are seen as eternally new. Through the anthropomorphising of culture and the culturalisation of individuals, the Indigenous person/culture becomes the 40,000 year history of human occupation of the continent. The melding of culture, time and Aboriginal personhood produces both the perpetual ending of Indigeneity and the perpetual newness of modernity. I argue that this temporal construction of indigeneity finds its resolution in the fantasy that the white anti-racist has witnessed the ending of ‘indigenous culture’, and indigenous people are then permitted to accrue the time of modernity.

## ***Evolutionary time, anthropological time***

From the moment Australia was first colonised, Europeans have considered Indigenous culture to be on the verge of death. The inevitable extinction of ‘primitive races’ had been a European trope since the late 1700s, but was consolidated with the rise of ‘social Darwinism’ in the late nineteenth century (Brantlinger 2003, Douglas and Ballard 2008, McGregor 1997). Before Darwin, ‘primitive’ races were thought to be at risk of extinction through any combination of (tribal or colonial) warfare, introduced diseases, and ‘self-extinction’ via the destructive effects of ‘savage’ customs. This third cause of death removed the coloniser from picture completely, locating the beginning of death before European contact (Brantlinger 2003).

The work of Alfred Russell Wallace and EB Tylor in the 1860s and 70s gave the theory of ‘self-extinction’ new life. They and other scholars drew on theories of evolution to argue that at some time in the evolutionary past, physical evolution due to natural selection ceased to operate on man because he had enough mental capacity to outwit evolutionary forces through clothes, tools and dwellings (Wallace 1864:clxv). From that distant point in history, the mental evolution of the races differed, as each tackled the demands of mastering their environments. Those in the cold climates of Europe had greater environmental demands to meet, and thus were more intellectually developed. Race extinction was seen as the natural consequence. If races differed in their mental development, it followed for Wallace that those “low and mentally undeveloped populations with which Europeans come into contact” were destined for “inevitable extinction” (Wallace 1864:clxv).

---

**2** James Frazer wrote to Spencer that “The anthropological work still to be done in Australia is...of more importance to the history of early man than anything that can now be done in the world”. (cited in KUPER, A. (1998) *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion*, London, Routledge.).

The anthropology of the Australians was seen as an urgent task critical to understanding man's past.<sup>2</sup>

In the twentieth century social evolutionism was widely critiqued, not least for naturalising the devastating effects of colonialism. But as I explore in this paper, the notion of the primitive in mortal danger from the moment that the coloniser sets eyes on him has proven remarkably durable through to contemporary times.

As one of the disciplines most closely associated with colonialism's 'others', anthropology has reflected and produced global discourses of difference. Historians of anthropology have argued that since its inception, anthropology constructed the savage "antithetically", " 'caught in a network of negations' as 'peoples without history, without writing, without religion, without morals, without police' " (Duchet 1971:11 cited in Fabian 1991:195).<sup>3</sup> The savage other is the object and civilised man is the subject. This is, of course, a common story across the "Great Divides" of modernity, be they male and female, culture and nature, straight and queer, or ableness and disability (Latour 1987). But there are two aspects of the 'indigenous' Other that are perhaps distinctive among modernity's Others. The first is that "almost as soon as travel accounts appear and congeal into a literary genre, savage societies are depicted as 'past', that is, as no longer existing in their original, undisturbed condition." (Fabian 1991:195). This reflects and produces the western obsession with the authenticity of the Other which is always slipping from one's grasp.

The twentieth century repudiation of evolutionism bequeathed a second distinctive aspect of this kind of Otherness. This is the concept that stands for what savage has, and what begins to die as soon as it is observed by white people: their culture.<sup>4</sup> The concept of culture was the great triumph of twentieth century anthropology. It continues to be a central trope in the management of human difference. Culture has arguably been the discursive cornerstone of both indigenous policy and indigenous identity across the developed world since the late 1960s.

Johannes Fabian's book *Time and the Other* (1983) outlines the temporal effects of the anthropological concept of culture. He argues that creating knowledge about anthropology's subjects involves creating temporal distance. The other is grounded in the past and seen as relatively unchanging.<sup>5</sup> Statements such as "Group X are matrilineal" are grounded in an "anthropological present" that produces objects that are homogenous and static in time. He coins the term allochronism to describe this placement of the other in a

---

<sup>3</sup> Fabian himself puts it like this: "Culture, inasmuch as it served as anthropology's guiding concept, has always been an idea post factum, a notion orientated toward the past (to 'custom' and 'tradition'), descriptive of a state of affairs (and often of a status quo), a nostalgic idea at best (when it mixed the study of exotic societies with regret) and a reactionary ideologeme at worst (when it was used optimistically to explain away as 'variation' what in many cases was the result of discrimination and violence)." FABIAN, J. (1991) *Time and the Work of Anthropology, Critical Essays 1971-1991*, Chur, Switzerland, Harwood Academic Publishers., page 193.

<sup>4</sup> Culture is "ontologized, i.e., given an existence apart." FABIAN, J. (1983) *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, New York, Columbia University Press. p157.

<sup>5</sup> Munn notes in her review of the anthropology of time that the "anthropological present" is focused on "long-term historical-myth time", on long cycles of repetition or with the concept of eternity, while "the problem of the future has typically been displaced by the past-present relation" MUNN, N. D. (1992) *The Cultural Anthropology of Time: A Critical Essay*. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 21, 93-123. page 115.



different time to ourselves, a move which denies the coevalness of the anthropologist and her subject, the empirical fact of their shared space-time in the act of ethnography. As Fabian puts it: “Coevalness is anthropology’s problem with time” (Fabian 1983:37).

Why do anthropologists do this? It may be the legacy of social evolutionism or it may be inherent to objectification itself. Fabian argues that while the influence of social evolutionary thought in anthropology was largely expunged in the early twentieth century and displaced by structural functionalism, allochronism was not discarded but became even more entrenched, moving from an empirical question to be debated (addressing the question, are ‘primitive’ societies ‘civilisation’s’ past?) to an implicit assumption.<sup>6</sup> He argues that the denial of coevalness through American cultural relativism and French structuralism also served political functions in the era of decolonisation.<sup>7</sup>

This paper is concerned not with anthropologists, but with contemporary settler Australians who support Indigenous rights. This broad group is likely to be white<sup>8</sup>, educated, middle-class, and by definition are politically progressive. I use the term ‘white anti-racist’ as shorthand for all these features. People who self-identify with these attributes support the principles of the self-determination era dominant in indigenous policy since the late 1960s. My particular ethnographic work has been with settler Australians who work in Indigenous health, although white anti-racists that work with Indigenous people in other arenas (including justice, the environment, education or the arts) employ and produce similar discourses (Kowal 2008)<sup>9</sup>. I will illustrate here how contemporary white anti-racists share an understanding of Indigenous culture that draws on twentieth century anthropology and the temporal idiosyncrasies it inherited from earlier evolutionary ideas about race. I show that in the hands of twenty-first century white anti-racists, these epistemological building blocks lead to a melding of time, culture and personhood.

The first example of white anti-racist discourse is a comment from the internet activist group GetUp’s blog site for their recent campaign to support remote ‘outstations’. Outstations are hundreds of tiny remote communities in the Northern Territory, most with less than twenty people, that are under threat from government efforts to improve infrastructure in larger remote communities and effectively force them to move there. One contributor to the blog, identified only as ‘Mark’, says:

---

**6** This is similar to the way that the concept of ‘race’ operates in Australia. It is widely rejected, yet the notion of fixed cultural differences in hierarchical relationship to each other survive quite well in the use of terms like ‘culture’ and ‘ethnicity’.

**7** Allochronic distancing acts to counter genuine recognition at the colonial frontier and rationalise injustices against colonized people, an effect he calls “chronopolitics” and others have called “temporal imperialism” FITZPATRICK, T. (2004) *Social Policy and Time*. *Time and Society*, 13, 197-219. See also ADAM, R. (2004) *Time*, Cambridge, Polity Press. A related strand of literature argues that time was (is) a crucial tool of colonization. For example, the imposition of clock time was necessary for harnessing the colonized population as a labour force. See COOPER, F. (1992) *Colonizing Time: Work Rhythms and Labor Conflict in Colonial Mombasa*. IN DIRKS, N. B. (Ed.) *Colonialism and Culture*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, NANNI, G. (2006) *The Colonization of Time: Ritual, routine and resistance in the 19th-century Cape Colony and Victoria*. History. Melbourne University of Melbourne.

**8** Particularity if one draws on a broader notion of white as not a skin colour but a dominant culture, see FRANKENBERG, R. (1993) *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

**9** The perspectives of the group of white anti-racists who participated in my ethnography were, of course, far more diverse and complex that comes across in this brief account of dominant forms of anti-racist discourse. For accounts of these white anti-racists that better explore this diversity and complexity, see KOWAL, E. (forthcoming) *The stigma of White privilege: Australian anti-racists and Indigenous improvement*. *Cultural Studies*, KOWAL, E. (2008) *The politics of the gap: Indigenous Australians, liberal multiculturalism and the end of the self-determination era*. *American Anthropologist*, 11, 338-348.

“Indigenous culture has, especially in the North, an unending life to this day of up to and over 40,000 years. Living through mini ice ages, the death of the megafauna and many other amazing changes we can not conceive upon. That amount of cultural knowledge of the world and human nature is beyond comprehension to us, and has value we can not conceive of.”<sup>10</sup>

Here, Indigenous culture is anthropomorphised, discussed here as if it were an actual person that has lived through mini ice ages and the death of the megafauna. Whatever the cultural background of the author (identified only as ‘Mark’), their presumably European ancestors lived through ice ages and alongside megafauna no less than the humans who populated Sahul some 50,000 years ago. Yet Mark strongly feels, as most white anti-racists do, that Europeans do not have the capacity to comprehend this “unending life” of Indigenous culture. When anthropology’s culture, past-directed and static, is applied to Indigenous people, it is personified, immortalised, and made radically alterior. This implies a complementary process by which Indigenous people are seen to inhabit ancestral time such that they are the same as their personified Culture. People who identify as Indigenous contain an essence, or inhabit time, in such a way that they embody the history of human occupation of the continent.

White anti-racists at the medical research Institute in Darwin where I conducted ethnographic research in 2004-5 routinely talked about contemporary Indigenous people in terms of the estimated time of occupancy of humans on the Australian land mass. In an email discussion of how Indigenous people have differing views one colleague argued that

“In my experience, individual (Aboriginal) people all have different ideas of what things should be tried, or how things should be done. It is similar in our society. How could you get all of Europe to agree on ways to do things? Look how long it has taken for the European Union to form! And Europe has only had a couple of thousand years to develop their differences. Aboriginal groups have had 40,000 years to develop theirs!!”<sup>11</sup>

In this example, ‘European culture’ has a 2,000 year history and ‘Aboriginal culture’ has a 40,000 year history with no consideration for historical continuities and ruptures that belie those timelines, let alone variation internal to those monolithic categories. The author appeals to historical time to date ‘European culture’, and to anthropological (or more literally archaeological) time for ‘Indigenous culture’. This disciplinary division of labour stretches the temporal horizon of Europeans to the Roman Empire, and that of Indigenous people to the limit of radiocarbon dating.

## ***The time of improvement***

In the year 2000, the Arnhem Land-based Christian development organisation Aboriginal Resource and Development Services published a book called *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die* (Trudgen 2000). It was writ-

---

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.getup.org.au/blogs/view.php?id=1874>

<sup>11</sup> [Fieldnotes 24/3/5]

ten by the cross-cultural educator Richard Trudgen, a mechanic-turned-linguist-turned-cross-cultural education guru. The book was a huge success. When I moved to Darwin from Melbourne at the end of 2000 to work as a doctor, several people told me to read it, and I duly bought a copy, read it, and was deeply moved by its message – basically, that indigenous good health was a matter of restoring traditional authority and tapping into Indigenous ‘high’ culture to develop a “cultural knowledge base” for modern diseases.

Time is central to Trudgen’s conception of two cultures out of sync:

“When we come from our cultural knowledge base to talk to a group of people who have a different cultural knowledge base, our communication doesn’t work. The people end up only getting the top, surface story because what we say to them in English doesn’t make any sense. They just don’t get it because they don’t have the supportive cultural information to make sense out of what is being talked about. It took Westerners some 400 years to assimilate the knowledge about what these little things that cause disease and sickness are [i.e. germs]. Nobody has run any extensive programs to get the knowledge of bacteria into Aboriginal society. Nobody has done it.” (Trudgen 2000:63-4)<sup>12</sup>

Here we have another side of the personified Indigenous culture discussed above. Indigenous people possess a time-sense that links them back to their distant ancestors, so they lack the “supportive cultural information” needed to understand germs. Westerners have had 400 years for germs to diffuse into their culture<sup>13</sup>, Trudgen is arguing here, but for Indigenous people, it is all brand new. The model of cultural knowledge operating here is a kind of cultural Lamarckianism. According to this model, both ‘Indigenous people’ and ‘Westerners’ are born with the cumulative sum of their ancestors’ knowledge pre-programmed into their neurons. Western children are born with the cultural knowledge that lets them believe in germs and thus conform to hand washing and antibiotics. While most people today would agree that one’s social environment is an important determinant of one’s beliefs, there is a sense here that there is no way that Yolngu can learn about germs. It requires a major intervention at the root of Indigenous culture in order to allow it to assimilate germ theory, fast-tracking the slow diffusion of new knowledge through the cultural body. Of course, the rapid assimilation of many modern technologies like mobile phones and electric guitars into ‘Aboriginal society’ without any help from cross-cultural consultants confounds Trudgen’s model (although I’m sure he has a good explanation for why ‘lack of cultural knowledge’ of electricity and satellites has not been a barrier to their use in these cases).

So how long is long enough to assimilate a new object into Indigenous culture? At the Institute where I conducted my research, the answer is ‘a very long time’. Institute researchers frequently bemoaned the short funding periods of 5 years at the most, when “we’re talking here about processes that are not just generational but they’re, they’re **centuries**.”<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> A similar argument is made in Peter Sutton, “Crowded House.” Invited speaker address for the annual conference of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, Alice Springs, 26-27 October 2007. Conference theme: ‘Which Way? Directions in Indigenous Housing’, p5

<sup>13</sup> Presumably taking 17th century Dutch scientist Anton van Leeuwenhoek as the starting point.

<sup>14</sup> [Transcript 2:13]

Another colleague at the research institute wrote a draft chapter on petrol sniffing that she asked me to read and provide feedback on. The chapter argued that as Aboriginal Australians did not use drugs comparable to petrol “as part of their traditional cultural practices”, “there is no reference point in the society against which the pharmacological, behavioural, cognitive, neurological and social consequences of petrol can be compared or understood”. Aboriginal people are thus confused about petrol sniffing and its effects. She tells us that “The first recorded report of petrol sniffing was in the 1930s and, by the 1960s, the practice was prevalent amongst adolescents”. But as “[p]etrol has only been used in Aboriginal populations for less than 40 years”, there has not been sufficient time to develop “ceremonial behaviours and taboos surrounding its use”, a process that may take thousands of years. These ceremonial behaviours can turn dangerous drugs into substances that can promote well-being, such as *yagé* among Cofán Indians in the Amazon and kava in the Pacific.

When we sat down to discuss her chapter, I brought up her argument that indigenous people have not been exposed to petrol sniffing for long (between 40 and 70 years) and therefore they don’t have a cultural framework for it. “I’m not sure about that argument”, I say. “Oh, I know what you mean”, she replies, “other people have said that there were psychoactive substances that were used [in the past]”, meaning that Indigenous culture may indeed have a cultural framework for the wider category of psychoactive substances. “No, that’s not what I was getting at.”, I replied. “More like, is 70 years enough time to develop cultural knowledge about a drug? If your parents or grandparents used the drug, is that enough cultural knowledge?”<sup>15</sup>

In retrospect, what I was doing here is refusing the anthropomorphising of culture and demanding that Indigenous people become coeval with the western observer. Both of us then gave examples of what could be called “contemporary cultural knowledge” among indigenous people, like a story told to me by a remote community teacher of students using their multiple names to draw three lots of Abstudy (government student support) payments, and a story she had heard that Indigenous people living in Darwin know that once a week at 2am there is computer maintenance on ANZ machines and it is possible to withdraw more money than is in your account. These stories allow actual Indigenous persons to accumulate knowledge of their environment, to enter the time of modernity, rather than requiring them to wait for an anthropomorphized culture to develop knowledge over centuries or millennia.

An important aspect of these stories of coeval Indigenous people is that they generally have a negative moral valence – ripping off the government (that is, the taxpayer) and the bank are not nice things to do. This points to the moral function that is served when white anti-racists draw on allochronic, anthropological time. It helps to rationalise behaviour they would otherwise view as immoral: Indigenous youth may sniff petrol and murder each other, but only because it is all so new to their culture.

---

15 [Fieldnotes 5/11/04 2:49]

In these examples, if allochronism were to end, it would both lessen alterity and heighten it. It would allow indigenous people to accumulate lived time rather than being tied to the protracted timescales of anthropomorphised culture. But it would also remove the sanitising effect of anthropological culture in explaining indigenous peoples' 'immoral' behaviours. White anti-racists engaged in indigenous improvement could no longer understand indigenous behaviours as a 'lack of cultural knowledge base', perhaps leading to their greater pathologisation.

Many argue that this is exactly what we have seen with the NT Intervention, and more generally with the paradigm shift in Indigenous affairs (Cowlshaw et al. 2006). With the apparent end of the self-determination era, the reign of anthropology's culture concept in indigenous policy (where it has been influential since the late 1960s (Rowse 2000) may be ending. We may be seeing the inherent limitations of this culture concept, including its allochronism, imploding within indigenous policy and within remote indigenous communities.

My final example shows how the temporality of indigeneity is incredibly flexible. It is from a seminar presented by Brian McCoy, a medical anthropologist who writes about men's health at Balgo, where he was a Jesuit priest for many years. He is telling the audience here about the effect of missions on the local population:

*These people have had contact only since 1939, a very small period of time in relation to their occupation of the area..... He shows us a photo he took when he got to Balgo Mission in 1973 when the mission was about to be closed.... When the kids were sent back to their parents in 1973, it had been 20 years since they had been taken from their parents.... he explains how this was a long time, a whole generation without parenting skills, an experience that explains the serious social problems in Balgo today.<sup>16</sup>*

Note that I do not wish to deny the impact of institutionalisation on the Balgo community (see McCoy 2007). What I am interested in is the contrast between 70-odd years of contact being a short time, while 20 years of the mission being a long time. We can explain this as the slippage between the time of anthropological culture and the time of lived experience, in this case, lived trauma. Although 70 years of contact is but a moment in relation to the time of anthropomorphised culture, 20 human years of lost cultural transmission is enough to end it.

This depiction of an ancient, vast culture crumbling on contact with the colonising culture is a common trope in contemporary anti-racist discourse.<sup>17</sup> While it may or may not be an accurate description of Indigenous experiences of the postcolony, its mimicry of social evolutionary logic illustrates the strong imprint of social evolutionism on contemporary conceptions of postcolonial time. This imprint is illustrated not least in the unconscious desire within white anti-racist discourse to witness the passing of indigenous culture.

---

<sup>16</sup> [Fieldnotes 2/6/05 4:47]

<sup>17</sup> There is of course a strong counter-discourse that sees Indigenous cultures as thriving and rejects any suggestion that they are in danger.

## *The wave of death*

In a central and persisting trajectory of modern thought, colonisation is seen as a wave of civilising progress and a wave of death. The wave breaks at the point of first contact with the dramatic violence of the colonial frontier. In the decades or centuries that followed, the undertow of the receding wave slowly erodes culture until the point of disappearance, an often imperceptible moment after which there is silence. This is why Fabian calls anthropology the science of disappearance.<sup>18</sup>

Numerous scholars have noted the strong desire among whites to access the authentic, undisturbed indigene, to be the first of our kind ever to puncture the radically different world of the other. There exists an equally strong desire to be the witness to the passing of that world, the final end to the wave of death that began with the audacity of European colonial expansion. Brantlinger (2003:4) discusses the numerous nineteenth century texts that lament the “dying, often last Aboriginal”. This desire to witness that world’s end explains why Indigenous culture has been ending for so long, but can never end: keeping Indigenous culture in a state of imminent ending preserves our opportunity to witness the moment of its passing. Consider this contemporary example of a world’s end from writer and artist Kim Mahood who travels to Mulan every year to visit people she has known since her childhood on a remote station in the Tanami desert. Here she watches a woman, a dear friend, as they visit a lake:

“Short and square and purposeful, dressed in matching skirt and blouse of aquamarine and pink, Bessie stalks towards the shoreline, calling out in the tone appropriate for addressing ancestral beings, alerting them to our presence and reassuring them that we are of the country. When the invocation is finished she says, ‘When I’m dead there’ll be nobody left to talk to the lake in its own language.’”

“It’s one of those moments when a number of half-apprehended intuitions fall into place, the shudder of realignments travelling through the body like an electric current, raising goose bumps that herald the imaginative grasp of a truth.”

“The words hang in the air. ‘When I’m gone there’ll be nobody left to talk to the lake in its own language.’”

“And so it must have happened by increments across the continent, that slow withdrawal of voices, the silence falling as the conversation between people and country lost the languages in which it could be spoken.” (Mahood 2007:5)

The silence falls. The silence that follows after culture is finally extinguished is tragic, but in some ways a relief. The slow wave of death at last recedes. The voices of the ancestors, under threat for so long, finally still. At one level, their death ensures our survival, the satisfying projection of the death drive onto an Other. And these Others are not indigenous persons, who will by default become contemporaneous with us, and finally be allowed to accumulate the time of modernity. Instead, the Other that will have ended is our anthropological notion of Culture. It is the death of allochronism itself, the negation of a negation<sup>19</sup>, the end of ending.

---

<sup>18</sup> Brantlinger refers to anthropology as a “science of mourning”. For other similar formulations see CLIFFORD, J. (1988) *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press. ROSALDO, R. (1989) Imperialist Nostalgia. *Representations*, 26, 107-122.

<sup>19</sup> following Fabian (1991).



This moving account illustrates the natural end of a culture at once melded to Indigenous personhood and divorced from social life. While in the past, this fearful conclusion would have been the extinction of the Aboriginal 'race', in its contemporary form it is Aboriginal culture that is passing. It is a scenario that some believe holds dire metaphysical consequences for both Indigenous people and white settlers.<sup>20</sup> I want to suggest, however, other reasons why this ending must be resisted by white anti-racists.

## ***Discussion: The end of culture without end***

As I have argued, in the settler-colonial imaginary, indigenous culture is defined in relation to the time of colonization, frozen at the moment of first contact, the moment that unleashed an unceasing wave of death. Within this imaginary, that conflates persons and culture and invests them with metaphysical essence, Indigenous adoption or mimicry of Western culture, including western time, is highly problematic. As Fabian, Kuper and others have noted, following Said, the construction of the other is an orientalist mirror in which we project the opposite of our self-image. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, the rise of the 'primitive' (a concept interchangeable with the 'ancient') provided a magical, communistic, nomadic, and promiscuous subject against which rational, capitalist, liberal democratic nations could be implicitly measured (Kuper 1998). The perpetual death of the primitive attested to the perpetual life of civilisation.

But among white anti-racists, who recognise that the demise of indigenous culture is the work of colonisation and not nature, there is another layer of affect and desire. If the adoption of Western practices and intermarriage into the wider society implies that Indigenous culture is ending, settler Australians are interpellated as assimilationists, as perpetrators of cultural genocide. Indigenous culture cannot ever be seen as ending, as this will imply that we have ended it. This denial of the possibility of cultural death is of course shared by Indigenous people and organisations who are themselves heavily invested in the survival of Aboriginal cultural distinctiveness, not least in order to attract the limited spoils offered by liberal multicultural states.<sup>21</sup>

The temporal implications of this are that white anti-racists are reluctant to let go of allochronism as the alternative can only be incorporation and assimilation, a problem Kevin Birth refers to as homochronism (Birth 2008). While allochronism is the placement of the other outside the dominant flow of time, homochronism places them within it, displacing them from their own distinctive temporalities.<sup>22</sup> In this way, the

---

**20** For example see BIRD ROSE, D. (forthcoming) *Wild Dog Dreaming: love and extinction*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press.

**21** See POVINELLI, E. A. (2002) *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism*, Durham and London, Duke University Press. Critics readily see this adoption of essentialised indigeneity by indigenous people themselves as strategic essentialism or false consciousness. For Achille Mbembe it is the "imprisoning model of history" MBEMBE, A. (2002) African Modes of Self-Writing. *Public Culture*, 14, 239-273.

**22** Even if white anti-racists were not invested in the maintenance of anthropological culture and its associated allochronism, it may not be so easy to cast away time distancing and plunge into coevalness. Birth distinguishes between the "intersection of

tension between allochronism and homochronism mirrors the tension between orientalism and remedialism (Kowal 2008). Striving for statistical (or in this case, temporal) equality is necessary to ‘closing the gap’ of Indigenous disadvantage, but this quest presents the unending danger that the process of improvement will lessen the cultural distinctiveness of Indigenous people, further colonising them. Encouraging or admitting the end of Indigenous temporal alterity may be necessary for participating in Western institutions but can also be seen to threaten Indigenous family functioning (see for example Burbank, 2006).<sup>23</sup>

Finally, if allochronism is allowed to end, or indeed, is already ending, what is beginning? For white anti-racists, indigenous people will be allowed to accumulate the time of modernity. Indigenous children would be seen as having as much capacity as white children to believe in germs and to learn to habitually wash their hands. Forty years would be seen as long enough for Indigenous people to develop social or cultural beliefs and practices about petrol sniffing. Indigenous culture would no longer be thought of as ‘the longest living culture on earth’, and instead would be seen as constantly changing over both the pre- and post-colonial periods while retaining elements of the past. Western culture would not be thought of as perpetually new, and Indigenous people would not be thought of as non-Western.

This vision would be aligned with the views of Noel Pearson, Marcia Langton and Peter Sutton, and with scholars outside Australia such as Achille Mbembe, who argue broadly that liberal conceptions and self-conceptions of Indigenous Australians, Africans and other subalterns that are embedded in victimhood and essential difference are responsible for much contemporary misery.<sup>24</sup> However, the ending of temporal orientalism would not be without cost, as we have seen with the re-assignment in the last five years of many remote communities from ‘culturally unique’ to ‘socially dysfunctional’. Difference is increasingly read as disadvantage. Whether this is welcome recognition or a tragic misrecognition is a question that remains highly contested.

---

different temporal subjectivities” and coevalness, arguing that a communicative exchange he shared with an informant was the former and not the latter (genuine coevalness). Shared time, or even shared understanding of temporality, is not sufficient to produce coevalness, and the use of history in anthropology produces merely an “illusory coevalness” as the Western historical clock is the reference point BIRTH, K. (2008) The creation of coevalness and the danger of homochronism. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 14, 3-20.

**23** The voluntary adoption of Western time by Indigenous people is equally problematic for white anti-racists. One solution to this is to read assimilation as covert resistance. A PhD thesis on the use of time in the colonisation of Kooris in Victoria describes how in 1882, Aborigines from the Coranderrk mission accused the Board of being “unpunctual” and “irregular” in distributing wages and rations. This implied a radical shift from the type of resistance that characterized earlier confrontations, wherein the struggle was carried out in the name of pre-colonial traditions, rather than in the discourse of the capitalist order. But this in itself was part and parcel of the compromises and negotiations that allowed indigenous peoples to resist assimilation successfully.” What looks like assimilation is in fact resistance NANNI, G. (2006) The Colonization of Time: Ritual, routine and resistance in the 19th-century Cape Colony and Victoria. *History*. Melbourne University of Melbourne., page 175.

**24** See MBEMBE, A. (2002) African Modes of Self-Writing. *Public Culture*, 14, 239-273, MOSES, D. (2010) Time, indigeneity, and peoplehood: the postcolony in Australia. *Postcolonial Studies*, 13, 9-32, MBEMBE, A. (2006) On the Postcolony: a brief response to critics. *African Identities*, 4, 143-178, LANGTON, M. (2008) Trapped in the Aboriginal reality show. *Griffith Review*, 19, 1-17, PEARSON, N. (2007) White guilt, victimhood and the quest for a radical centre. *Griffith Review*, 16, 1-39, SUTTON, P. (2009) *The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Australians and the End of the Liberal Consensus*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press.

## References

- Adam, R. 2004. *'Time'*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Bird Rose, D. (forthcoming). *'Wild Dog Dreaming: love and extinction.'* Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press.
- Birth, K. 2008. 'The creation of coevalness and the danger of homochronism.' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 14, 3-20.
- Brantlinger, P. 2003. *'Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1800-1930'*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press.
- Burbank, V. 2006. 'From Bedtime to On Time: Why Some Aboriginal People Don't Especially Like Participating in Western Institutions.' *Anthropological Forum* 16, 3-20.
- Clifford, J. 1988. *'The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art'*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- Cooper, F. 1992. *'Colonizing Time: Work Rhythms and Labor Conflict in Colonial Mombasa'*. In Dirks, N. B. (Ed.) *Colonialism and Culture*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press.
- Cowlshaw, G., Kowal, E. & Lea, T. 2006. 'Double Binds'. *Moving Anthropology: Critical Indigenous Studies*. Darwin, Charles Darwin University Press.
- Douglas, B. & Ballard, C. 2008. *'Foreign Bodies: Oceania and the Science of Race 1750-1940'*. Canberra, ANU E Press.
- Duchet, M. 1971. *Anthropologie et histoire au siecle des Lumieres*, Paris, Maspero.
- Fabian, J. 1983. *'Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object'*. New York, Columbia University Press.
- Fabian, J. 1991. *'Time and the Work of Anthropology, Critical Essays 1971-1991'*. Chur, Switzerland, Harwood Academic Publishers.
- Fitzpatrick, T. 2004. 'Social Policy and Time'. *Time and Society*, 13, 197-219.
- Frankenberg, R. 1993. *'White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness'*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Kowal, E. 2008. 'The politics of the gap: Indigenous Australians, liberal multiculturalism and the end of the self-determination era'. *American Anthropologist*, 11, 338-348.
- Kowal, E. (forthcoming) 'The stigma of White privilege: Australian anti-racists and Indigenous improvement'. *Cultural Studies*.
- Kuper, A. 1998. *'The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion'*. London, Routledge.

- Langton, M. 2008. 'Trapped in the Aboriginal reality show.' *Griffith Review* 19, 1-17.
- Latour, B. 1987. *'Science in Action'*. Milton Keynes, Open University Press.
- Mhood, K. 2007. 'Listening is harder than you think.' *Griffith Review* 19, 1-8.
- Mbembe, A. 2002. 'African Modes of Self-Writing'. *Public Culture* 14, 239-273.
- Mbembe, A. 2006. 'On the Postcolony: a brief response to critics'. *African Identities* 4, 143-178.
- Mccooy, B. 2007. "'They Weren't Separated": Missions, Dormitories and Generational Health'. *Health and History* 9, 48-69.
- Mcgregor, R. 1997. *'Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880-1939'*. Melbourne, Melbourne University Press.
- Moses, D. 2010. 'Time, indigeneity, and peoplehood: the postcolony in Australia'. *Postcolonial Studies* 13, 9-32.
- Munn, N. D. 1992. 'The Cultural Anthropology of Time: A Critical Essay'. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21, 93-123.
- Nanni, G. 2006. *'The Colonization of Time: Ritual, routine and resistance in the 19th-century Cape Colony and Victoria'*. History. Melbourne University of Melbourne.
- Pearson, N. 2007. 'White guilt, victimhood and the quest for a radical centre'. *Griffith Review* 16, 1-39.
- Povinelli, E. A. 2002. *'The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism'*. Durham and London, Duke University Press.
- Rosaldo, R. 1989. 'Imperialist Nostalgia'. *Representations* 26, 107-122.
- Rowse, T. 2000. *'Obliged to be Difficult: Nugget Coombs' Legacy in Indigenous Affairs'*. Melbourne, Cambridge University Press.
- Sutton, P. 2009. *'The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Australians and the End of the Liberal Consensus'*. Melbourne, Melbourne University Press.
- Trudgen, R. 2000. *'Djambatj Mala: Why Warriors Lie Down and Die'*. Darwin, Aboriginal Resource and Development Services.
- Wallace, A. R. 1864. 'The Origin of Human Races and the Antiquity of Man Deduced from the Theory of Natural Selection'. *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London* 2, clviii-clxxxvii.

# Death as the end of a future

*Gaynor Macdonald*  
*University of Sydney*

## ***Abstract***

This collection offers an opportunity to reflect on one largely unacknowledged experience emerging in communities suffering social crises: that of older people living through the death of their children, their grandchildren and their cultural heirs. Ancestors are a common theme in anthropology, so too are the ways in which different peoples think about and develop ways of dealing with death. The 'end' that is encountered in the death of descendants cannot be encompassed by notions of culture as meaningful practice because it represents the *denial of meaning*. I explore the various impacts of such deaths in Aboriginal contexts I am familiar with, and their implications for anthropology's own concern with 'ends.'

**Keywords:** Death, disappearing worlds, denial of mortality

## ***Becker and our need for heroic illusions***

When Ernest Becker (1973) wrote of the heroic illusions by which we avoid our mortality, he was referring most of all to the systems of religious belief that emerge from our capacity for transcendence, for the consciousness that enables us to see our own death. Our illusions are the necessary denial of our mortality, the creations of futures which enable us to move into tomorrow. In immortality human beings enable themselves to live with the consciousness of inevitable death. Becker points out that the investment we have in our illusions of immortality brooks no challenge: to acknowledge or legitimate the illusions of others would confront us with the illusoriness of our own desires. And therein for Becker lay the root of human evil, in this uniquely human capacity by which we deny our mortality, illusions we cling to so desperately that we are prepared to kill as well as to die for them. Our struggles with the other are over the right to define life, death and immortality and so the other, as difference, must be repressed. We cannot allow the illusions of the other to kill our immortal selves by revealing our own fragility.

Post-modernist theoreticians have challenged the need for the collective meaning systems which Becker would call a people's heroic illusions. And so we are now in an age preoccupied with the ends of worlds, the death of God/s, the emptiness of promises such as progress for all or an end to poverty, and the bleakness of futures on a despoiled planet. In response, people turn to new cults, religions of a by-gone age, ever more bizarre forms of science/IT fiction, imagined indigenous worlds, in fact, to anything that can restore the illusion of immortality.

So far, I will have said little that would not be familiar. Here I want to use a story of the end of one woman's world, as she has known it, to examine anthropology's own heroic illusions. Notwithstanding its commitment to understanding the experiences, and illusions, of others, much of the discipline remains embedded in modernity's illusions, with its central ideas of history as the passage of time, the inevitability of progress and change, and the superiority of a way of life that not only has the ability but also the right to replace all others.

So I ask, how does Becker's work sit with anthropology's central question, 'what does it mean to be human', including what it means to die. We are all familiar with studies of mortuary rituals, cosmologies and cosmogonies of life and death. We spent decades looking at whole worlds supposedly disappearing under the weight of capitalism, modernity and the market. In response to these disappearances, the discipline has been subjected to regular prophecies of its own ends as its exotic subject disintegrated before its eyes (for examples, see discussions in Hymes 1972; Asad 1973; Price 2008; White and Tengan 2001).

## ***Humans***

For me a human being is a bio-psychosocial being, not determined by genes or DNA, although these will establish certain constraints on physical capacities and the meanings given to them. This human being is inextricably social, requiring the economic and social organisation of others from its inception, embedded in a mutually-constitutive world which it in turn will help to reproduce. This human being is also capable of consciousness, self-consciousness, imagination and innovation – extraordinary capacities by which to produce meaningful worlds, and to change and adapt to myriad environments and circumstances, including, as Becker argues, the means and the desire to produce evil. It is the very complexity of humanness as material, psychic and social that brings about the capacity for transcendence. Without it, the quotidian socialities through which we live our lives would not be possible: from the moment we require our mother's milk, we have to reach out of the self. This capacity brings about the awareness of life and death, good and evil. And so, we construct systems of meaning, illusory or not, to deal with the contradictions inherent in being a material, social, psychic human being. And these include the construction of ideas (illusions, legitimations, justifications) which protect us from ourselves, each other, and our morality.

Anthropologists have often glossed the outcomes of this extraordinary capacity for meaning by which our lives become bearable as 'culture'. This has led to culture being understood in synchronic terms, and certain human beings 'belonging' to one or another set of expressive outcomes. But it is not the outcomes, the ways of worlds of difference in a certain place and time, which is important so much as culture as capacity. Our *cultural capacity* includes the socially/materially-oriented capacity to make worlds shared with significant others meaningful, to weigh up the need for the social against the desires of the self, to cooperatively design systematic and shared means of using and sharing resources, of compromise, reproduction and stability. And it includes our capacity for transcendence, the sense of being able to reach out from one's self, to sense and engage the other, to imagine other worlds of possibility. These capacities, definitional



of humanness, work together to give meaning not only to life but also to death. They open up hopes and futures in the face of what would otherwise be frightening ends.

There are those who would throw out the concept of culture in anthropology. If they are referring to the static notions of yesteryear, the argument is hardly worth having – the discipline agrees. There are still those, who see it as having become synonymous with essentialism, radical relativism or racism, and reject it. There are those, who see it as watered-down, rendered insubstantial and meaningless, a poorly conceptualised notion within cultural studies and popular culture. But I retain it for the same reason that Sahlins (2008) continuously espoused Leslie White's dictum, that 'no ape could appreciate the difference between holy water and distilled water', and because it speaks to the capacity of human beings to bring imaginative meanings to bear on their lives such that they can keep on keeping on. This has recently been evocatively demonstrated in Austin-Broos' (2009) recent study on the Western Arrernte, a people subjected to waves of trauma through their experience of colonisation. We do not 'inherit' or 'belong' to 'a culture,' we are forever producing, reproducing and innovating expressions of what it means to be a human, social, cultural being, each day living our lives anew, drawing selectively on imagined pasts and presents to create (illusory) futures to make sense of our lives. We develop meaningful cultural practices to continually reproduce the material, social and transcendent conditions within which we can live with a sense of worth and hope. Hope is another expression of that transcendent power: we need a tomorrow to get through today. The concept of culture is inseparable from the notion of transcendence, as both are from the psychic dimensions of human life. This is to argue that 'being human' cannot be reduced to its biological/material and social dimensions (c.f., Mimica 2007).

Transcendence is too often reduced in anthropology to systems of religious belief, to spirituality, to something outside of the self. It is, rather, something inextricably part of the self, of the ways the self experiences the quotidian, the everyday – as Carla Stang (2009) writes – as well as what lies beyond it. This quality of transcendence produces our desire and capacity for sociality, enabling us to redefine a source of food into more than a biological – as culturally-constituted person. Becker may be right about our capacity for transcendence producing human evil to protect our immortality, but it also produces its opposite, feeling, empathy, oneness, love – it may go by many names but we know it as an experience that connects, with a landscape, a person, a newborn, or a stranger's smile – an experience that literally fills us with the knowledge that, at that moment, life surges through us. At that moment, in profound psychic depths we are barely aware of, we can also be immortal.

This capacity for transcendence brings about the illusions by which to combat our mortality but not simply in heroic style. It also brings about the less heroic sense of a future, a tomorrow, and hope that can prevail in despair. Agnes needs no great illusions to frame her own political efforts in terms of what she wants for her children's children. The beggar hopes each time he lifts the lid of the rubbish bin. Schona paints her nails even though she will spend the day rummaging through vast smoky piles of garbage dumped by the wealthy of her city. Many of us will have been profoundly affected by the suicide of someone we have known, someone who lost that sense of a future. It is fragile, not to be taken for

granted. Diverse cultural worlds of heroic illusion have developed over millennia to enable human beings become persons with tomorrows and a beyond. Many of these ways of being human, in the diversity of times and places anthropology is aware of have been torn apart during the past century and are in disarray: existential despair replaces heroic illusion. Mooney told me he drank because he wanted to die; for others alcohol is an easier, more social and thus meaning-filled option to deal with the emptiness of a life without hope, even without the effort illusions require: a small thread of drunken sociality proves that while there is life there is hope.

I have spent much of my career seeking to understand how Wiradjuri people of central New South Wales have, historically and today, wrestled with the challenges of being colonial subjects within the Australian state. If there is one phrase that sums up their struggles, it has been Agnes telling me that *she* may not see the future they are fighting for but perhaps her children's children will. How the Wiradjuri people I have spent much of my life with understand 'the future' permeates my work, if not explicitly. Social movements, identity quests, interest groups, art work, land rights – all are ways of living with a sense of a future, with hope, however fragile. Illusions take us through each day, heroic or not.

## **Maisie**

My story is about one woman who is euphemistically referred to as being a person from 'the Kimberley' of north Western Australia, not that she uses this term. She is Worrora, from the spectacular Prince Regent River with its famous King Cascade. I met Maisie four years ago. She is a mother but not a grandmother, although she should be at her age. Her only son is a drinker who causes property damage and is caught in the revolving jail door. He doesn't have a social father, a man who has raised and instructed him. She has worked most of her life. Despite attending college and university courses aiming to become involved in community health services, she is a cleaner, although occasionally has short term jobs in her community. She is also beautiful with glowing skin and a face that can light up in a smile full of joy and humour. She loves to laugh although doesn't do so often.

A senior woman, although not quite in the ways that only grandmothers are, Maisie is respected locally but not always liked. She complains a lot and gets angry when she becomes so frustrated at the difficulty she often has in understanding whitefellas or in making her own meanings understood by them. She seems irrational to them, she can make whitefellas afraid and they may try and avoid her. She has spent hours with me, explaining the troubles around her, as I try and translate other people's intentions and her hostile reactions into words and concepts she can better grasp, that can help her act in her own interests and re-establish communication with people who are simply talking past her, perhaps because they can't be bothered doing otherwise. Most of her aggressive outbursts are caused by not fully understanding, by not being given adequate explanations she can make sense of, and the consequent powerlessness this leads to – stressful enough at times to warrant a phone call to Sydney to help sort it out. Her outlet is the church and a church retreat now and again to Perth or Darwin.

Maisie is not well. She has diabetes and, like many others, does not really understand its impact on her body or that it will kill her. If she is lucky, it will do so before she loses limbs or goes blind. Her growling and her angry outbursts leave her lonely. She likes living on her own in town rather than close to her family – although she would live closer if she could also keep her independence. She hates the mission manager, who even I think has walked straight out of a 1930s movie about Aboriginal Protection Board managers. But then, she hates anyone who speaks down to her, who doesn't treat her with respect, and there are many white people in that category, and a few Aboriginal people. She has become problematised. She ought of course to be a calm, assured, senior woman, replete with knowledge, respect and wisdom. But her life has been too disruptive, her own elders died too young, she embodies the history of removals and dispossession that commenced just before she was born.

Maisie has one burning desire, to return to visit her country, and to take some of the young people around her. She feels it as a great weight of responsibility although she doesn't know how to achieve her aspirations. It is not just about finding the money to go north. She wants to see young people taught navigation, catering, shipbuilding and so on, so they could run their own tourist industry. She is using royalty money from mining to accumulate camp gear for her trip home but she is frustrated by the paternalistic and bureaucratic structures which hold this money in trust and dole out portions as if they were rations of old, in non-commercial and non-reproductive ways. But it was not Maisie and her own heroic illusions about the rekindling of her country that I found challenging in my valued and warm relationship with her. It is the fact that I know, and she knows, that soon there will be no more of her people. A whole way of life a unique story of the extraordinary capacities of human beings; Maisie's people eked out a meaningful existence in the most beautiful but harshest of environments, even today almost inaccessible. No wonder the whitefellas' (Presbyterian) mission was an attractive new base: it provided food and sheltered them from the violent excesses of the cattle barons taking over the best parts of their country. They stayed on the mission until the government refused to support them anymore: it was too costly to send the boat up with supplies. And so they moved south, not forced to, but unable to sustain their old ways of life after so much disruption, and perhaps not wanting to return to the arduous work of hunting and gathering in a place that offered no Sahlinesque affluence. They were prepared to embrace a new life.

I doubt, however, that they would have had any sense of the enormity of the betrayal that would face them. They would not get the resources through which to join that new world – the education, the opportunities. They would stay on its margins, increasingly frustrated by good-hearted whitefellas who knew so much better than they did how they should be living out their lives. Their children would get third class education, would return home to poorly built and maintained houses, to diets which would exacerbate ill health. They would not be given opportunities to return north to renew themselves and their patri-country through ritual. And instead of proud, autonomous people, with a history that exemplified all that human beings are capable of, they would become generic Aborigines, the worst kind of Australian. And eventually, one patriclan after another would die out.

I was confronted in a new way. Not with death but with the end of a future. That is a death of a very different kind. It is not the death of society that Margaret Thatcher espoused, although neo-liberalism's illusions are cause enough for grief. Nor is it about childlessness in a conventional sense. One's own lack of children does not mean that one cannot see a future in the lives of other children. But it is the death of one people's story in the remarkable stories of human capacities to imagine themselves through a heroic illusion that seeks to fulfil their human potential in the face of their mortality, and thus enables them to keep on keeping on. This is not about mortality in the human sense, but the death of an experience of transcendent sociality, the life blood of lives shared in a place and time of the Kimberley.

## ***Maisie's illusions***

What made an impact on me was the knowledge I have, and Maisie has, that she is the last of her patriline, the way the law of her country is transmitted. Her son will take the country-identity of the man she should have married. She does have a brother, but he is childless, disinterested and also drinks most of the time. Hers is the last patriline, the last patri-estate of that particular stretch of country. While cultural tradition would allow for it to be taken up by neighbours, Maisie clearly understands herself as the last person of a people. I began to understand her aggression, her loneliness, depression and her driving sense of urgency in another way.

The north west Kimberley is inaccessible to any but the well trained and well equipped hiker. It is a series of steep gorges, cascading waterfalls, sharp rocks piled up like bricks, except that they are the size of skyscrapers. Those tourists wealthy enough to afford the cruises, with crews trained to navigate the fiord-like coastline, are offered the glimpses money can buy. The village set up by missionaries in 1915 brought Maisie's grandparents and parents in, willingly enough given the government-supply of food. This village is now a pile of corrugated iron covered in long grasses and a few old water tanks. Even if Maisie could afford a boat, when she reached the coast she would need to launch a smaller one to go upstream to the gorge, where she would need to climb a steep gorge, then follow the creek until it became incredibly narrow. Then it would widen out again, on for a couple more kilometres, and all the time she would be carrying the food she would need. Better still if she could find the thousands of dollars required to hire a helicopter which would enable her to enjoy the spectacular views.

There is money now from the gas being mined off the coast and she has bought a swag, camping gear, wet weather gear and so on in preparation for the trip. The pile grows bigger each time I visit. I suddenly realize that this is Maisie's 'heroic illusion', the return home which will make everything alright, make her life mean something in the face of death. It may alleviate the aggression, and provide her with stories. That glint in her eye when she dreams her dreams will be more apparent. It is what will allow her to die. Maisie is the end of a particular kind of future. But as a human being and a person, she still needs to be able to look ahead. She needs to know that she is recognized as a person, that her people mattered and

will remain in memories and will be commemorated. That someone, in some way, will give her and her people the immortality they always craved.

I found myself realizing that, in this nation called Australia, she doesn't matter. She will die, as the last of her people, and no one will notice – except for a few old people locally, who know they face a similar end without a future. No one will notice because there are simple cultural strategies in place to camouflage such ends. For even modernity does not want to admit that it produces ends – this is its internal dilemma, that its actions in bringing about other people's ends presage its own eventual end. Secular modernity also needs heroic illusions.

### ***Strategy 1: language***

One strategy to conceal the end of Maisie's people as a people in human history lies in our use of language. Just as civilians slaughtered by bombs become anonymous 'collateral damage', so Maisie's people will cease to have a name except as one of many. Already people talk about the Aboriginal – or, worse, the new form, Indigenous – people of the Kimberley. It is still possible to get a map which shows the distinct countries of this region, each named for its language. Many of the languages on this map are already extinct but remain on the map as if the language and the people who spoke them were still there, in country. Educational materials progressively homogenize them: as 'the people of the Kimberley', they are alive and well.

This happened long ago in Tasmania. When it became clear to the British that they had all but exterminated the populations of about nine different countries on the island, nine expressions of human creativity, and hundreds and hundreds of people, they stopped referring to them as 'the Tasmanians'. Once dead or successfully removed from the Island, the Tasmanians were renamed 'Aborigines'. The power to name is significant. It brings into being and it destroys being. Tasmanians were a distinctive people and while a few survivors did indeed slip through the violent deaths from disease and massacre, the life of Tasmanians was ended in an encounter intended to be genocidal. The British were never accused of genocide: it had not occurred because there were thousands of 'Aboriginal people' on the mainland. This nihilistic linguistic homogenizing served to conceal the genocidal evil of the white man's heroic illusions of superiority and progress, and thus the legitimacy of that evil. The Worrora, Ngarinyin, Wunambul, Wila Wila, Gaambera and others of the West Kimberley are fast becoming 'the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley.' No one need know that yet another group of peoples has disappeared under the governance of white Australia. In the glossing of an entire continent of social and cultural variation into the one notion, *Aboriginal*, no one need know that genocide has been, and was intended to be, the price that would be paid for the development of a nation.

## **Strategy 2: History**

The second strategy is the invention of history. Modernity has its own great illusions by which it confronts the death of other ways of life around it. It has caused those deaths, but need not acknowledge this. For in consigning 'other people' to the inevitability of history as a process of decay, because they were too 'traditional', we elide our need to destroy them to augment our own illusions. We celebrated our own capacity to change and to be modern, while denying 'them' the right or resources through which to do so. Instead, it is inevitable that the tide of history will wash certain ways of life away, inevitable that some worlds will disappear. After all, we have invented history to tell such stories. History is our great illusion that allows us to divert our gaze from the evil of our own actions.

## **Strategy 3: The future**

The third strategy which allows us to deny and destroy the heroic illusions of others to maintain the supremacy of our own is our obsession with technologies of their destruction and our longevity. However we name the 'us', as western, modern, white, we will fight wars to stop other people waging them, we will turn off the lights to stop glaciers from melting, and we will spend untold millions on health to extend our biomaterial selves. Now we are developing cryonics to freeze ourselves for the future, designed, apparently, to 'preserve and protect the gift of human life ... to maintain life, not reverse death' (<http://www.alcor.org/>). We appropriate the future of others such as Maisie. This is an appropriation of other people's capacity for transcendence as well as a denial of the transcendent quality of our relationship with them. We do not define them as part of a future but as washed away, inevitably, by history's tides.

## **Ends**

But still we fear. For in denying a future to others, in camouflaging the ways in which we have brought about their ends, we confront our illusions. It is little wonder that anthropology would think the time right to have a symposium on the ends of worlds. It has not worried much about the ends of any worlds over the past century. It has presided over a series of films on *Disappearing Worlds*. As recently as 1994 a video was released, *Disappearing World: Kayapo*. Ironically, it 'stars' the Kayapo. The old man on the cover is smiling. No one is offered a future in modernity's destructive world.

In 1992, Nguyen (1992:33), reminiscent of Ruth Benedict, was still writing about the irreversible destruction of anthropology's other: those 'intricate, exotic and delicate edifices which could not change.' As last vestiges they 'remain only in the form of historical and anthropological curiosities'. But these others are not the story of modernity's past that James Frazer envisaged a century ago. Rather, they are modernity. And as anthropology turns its gaze from the exotic to the marginalised, it becomes clearer that



our task has perhaps always been the examination of modernity's evil. Biehl (2001), writing of Brazil's Vita, its 'zone of abandonment', drew on Mauss to argue there was a social death capable of ravaging the mind and body of a person. Mauss's illusion was that social death stemmed only from witchcraft, prohibitions and taboos that were no longer part of modernity. Biehl's (2001:136) work contradicts both Mauss' illusions as well as any sense that modernity itself is not a carrier of its own death:

The *abandonados* in Vita are the carriers and witnesses of the ways in which social destinies of the poorest and the sickest are ordered. The experience of these who live in such a dead space/language is traversed by the country's structural readjustment, unemployment, malfunctioning public health system, and infamously unequal distribution of wealth and technology. ... Those occupying the upper strata of society not only live longer; their right to live longer is bureaucratically decreed or biomedically ensured through the mechanisms of the market.

In addressing the ways in which others have devised their own heroic illusions, and how they have dealt with their devastation, anthropologists confront the culpability as well as the illusoriness of our ways of being. If our subjects are the frightening story of our own future death, what is anthropology?

An anthropology of ends?

The current preoccupation in contemporary social worlds with 'the ends of worlds, evident in various forms: music, art, novels, film and computer games, alongside climate change debates and so on indicates that this preoccupation is an apt subject for anthropology. But the obsessing of middle class moderns/post-moderns about the ends of their worlds seems a world away from grappling with people actually facing the end of a world. While anthropology has concerned itself about worlds ending (usually 'disappearing'), it has seldom looked at the ethnographic experience of these endings. The focus has been on maintaining these worlds within their 'savage slot' (Trouillot 2002, 2003; Austin-Broos 1998), the disappearance of which was defined as inevitable, rather than how and why people's lives were being ripped apart, been changed to the extent that creative, imaginative cultural reproduction was no longer possible. In what contexts and conditions does this take place? Biehl (2001, 2005) has achieved this in his moving study of people living out their ends in La Vita, a 'town' of people who have become what Bauman (2004) aptly calls 'wasted lives', the inevitable 'outcasts of modernity'. These are the localized expressions that global forces take insignificant account of.

I do not suggest that anthropology has eschewed the study of change and innovation. Clearly this is a hallmark of the late twentieth century. Most notable perhaps is the work of Sahlins (1985, 1992, 1995, 2000), but many others could be cited. In the Australasian environment, significant work has been done by, for instance, Robert Tonkinson (1991), Diane Austin-Broos (2003, 2009), Merlan (1988) and Morris (1989). Earlier work includes that of Beckett (2005[1957]), Worsley (1955); Petri 1969, 1980; Petri and Petri-Odermann 1970), Lommel (1950), Roy Wagner (1974) and Alexis Biersack (1996, 2006) in Papua New Guinea. All of these demonstrate anthropology's long-standing and 'deep concern with innovation and change [as] a dominant theme in Aboriginalist anthropology.'<sup>2</sup>

But important as the realisation of change, innovation and creativity has been, it is not always possible. Worlds that have at least ideologically been able to reproduce themselves in both stable as well as changing conditions cannot always do so. There is change which, for some, is experienced as death. Lommel (1950), for instance, attributed the dramatically falling birth rate and disintegrating social organisation of the peoples of the north eastern Kimberley, including the Worrora with whom he had lived in 1930, to what we might refer to today as psychic violence, what he called 'the influence of modern culture on the psychological sphere' (1950:68) and the 'destruction of the psychic atmosphere' necessary to social and biological life (1950:75). Lommel recorded a new cult designed to assist people better deal with these modernist influences, including poisonous weeds, leprosy and syphilis, and 'picky-bas (police-boys) (1950:78).

To be part of an Aboriginal social experience (as distinct from the notion of community as residential entity, requires that one be located socially and spatially –in other words, in terms of kin and country. Maisie's experience is both that of the loss of viable attachment to country, when she and other Worrora were eventually located near Derby, as well as descendants through whom one's sense of an ongoing life which transcends one's own mortality can be realised (as captured so eloquently in the novel by P D James, *The Children of Men*, 1993). Spatial 'belonging' need not mean residence: it can be expressed through use of the language which adheres to that country (Merlan 1988) as well as through knowledge, with or without visiting (although *experience* is more highly valued as knowledge) and through being able to 'look after.' Maisie's country has been de-peopled, rendered remote and inaccessible except by the use of technologies of travel (such as helicopters) well beyond her financial means.

I was struck by the question of an anonymous reviewer of this piece, who asked for more detail about Maisie's life (which I have deliberately avoided for I do not wish to more specifically identify her when this is not pertinent to my argument) but, more particularly, who asked, 'Is she not part of a wider Aboriginal community? If so, is she in touch with them? And is the nature of her relationship with 'whitefellas' encompassed solely in the terms described? Does she have no close friends or acquaintances who are whitefellas?' In reply I can affirm that Maisie's abject loneliness is one experienced in a context in which she is surrounded by people, but they are not a part of her 'self', her culturally-significant others, nor her own future, and they cannot provide that future. The close kin she likes to spend time with are nieces and nephews and their children, her 'grannies,' but none of them, because of marriage and kinship rules, belong to her country and language. White people can only be acquaintances, however friendly. They cannot be part of the social self by which specific forms of personhood - and thus forms of immortality – are realised. There is no next generation to whom to pass on the specific knowledges and rights that she holds. She and her country are culturally orphaned and childless.

The transcendent is a necessary quality of Aboriginal being, inseparable from coming into being and one's progress back to the other realm of life (commonly referred to in Australia as the Dreaming). This is inseparably an individualised and social being, in that any person is but one expression of a totemically-

conceived whole. The person as a social and spatialised being is unique and autonomous at the same time as being inextricably networked. Unique social+spatial identity is constituted within a holistically conceived social-cosmic world. Being a member of a residential community or having 'friends' is not constitutive of Aboriginal personhood. The transcendental for Maisie relates to the conditions of possibility for the reproduction of selves. She reaches out for transcendence as her ancestors taught her, but it is all the more illusory in a world in which the conditions have been so radically altered. Christian ritual provides a proximate experience, valued in itself, but ultimately it cannot fill the social-spatial void. I find this circumstance so profoundly different from the Wiradjuri people on the Lachlan River of south-east Australia, among whom I have worked over many years. While they, too, are encountering devastating changes, and have done so in the past, those I know well live within the country of their ancestors, and have many descendants: they have had the ingredients of renewal throughout their much longer colonial history of modernist impacts. Any form of renewal or meaningful transformation requires certain conditions of possibility. There is no little irony in the fact that these have been more available, if in constraining ways, for Wiradjuri in the highly-developed state of New South Wales, but not for the remote Worora.

What 'conditions of possibility' might have made more sense of Maisie's life for her? First, I would interpret these as economic – no cultural production can take place where there is no possibility of reproducing the specificities of economic well-being through which specific cultural meanings can find expression. I mean economic in a wide sense, as those resources through which people can express their social selves, which give them a degree of personal and social autonomy through which to do so. The relationship between cultural capacity, economic viability and cultural reproduction is irreducible and interdependent. Without it, the psychic strength, the imaginings or illusions, cannot find expression, whether to evil (Becker's concern) or to open up the extraordinary wonder of human social life – the best as well as the worst. Even evil has its own value in the worlds of heroic illusion. The destruction of the psychic, social and economic conditions of possibility does not lead to evil (although it has led from time to time to increases in sorcery as people try to avert the worst) but to despair. Despair is the absence of illusion, which is a cruelty far beyond the evil with which Becker was concerned. Despair has led Maisie's own siblings, and many others, to seek refuge in alcohol, finding in it a conviviality to depress the reality that one cannot be an adequate, moral person in a world that offers no possibility. The knowledges and skills required of living as kin in country have not been transmitted or only partially so, or are derided and devalued in a colonial context, or the possibility of practice has been rendered impossible. When cultural reproduction is not possible, 'change' ceases to be an option, there is only despair. The hope, vision, vitality and imagination which produce the rich diversity of human illusions of which anthropologists are aware, by which the peoples of the world have lived and died, are a necessary condition of human social life. Alcohol has not been Maisie's refuge. She is tolerant of, but sad about those for whom it has been. She seems to know that she has little to offer those without hope, whose self-respect has been so eroded, but she doesn't let go of the hope that they may turn themselves around.

Maisie's story invites us to examine more closely the conditions of possibility that exist for people,

as individuals or as social entities. In Maisie's case, these will not – cannot – be found in better material conditions: housing, education, employment. They are in the conditions by which human beings realise themselves as culture-producers – not as heirs to tradition but, as has been shown to be possible by Austin-Broos (2009), for instance, as people able to reimagine themselves in situations of change. This re-imagining is not always possible: Maisie and her drunk siblings have not been able to do so. One requires a modicum of social and economic *autonomy* – a viable space (social+spatial) within which to imagine a life, which is psychically and biologically healthy enough to allow for intergenerational transmission; situations, which allow for the recreation of social selves. An increasing number of people in the 'modern world' are finding themselves in conditions which make these essentials of human expression impossible to realise. Maisie challenges anthropologists to understand the conditions of impossibility that produce ends for persons as well as for the ways of life which brought their personhood into being. More importantly, we can better identify the conditions of possibility by which illusions (whether heroic or not) become possible, thus allowing for the full expression of humanness, at its best as well as its worst. We have long studied the meanings (illusions) people give to their lives, and the extraordinary human capacity we each have to do so. We now live in a world that demands we more thoroughly explore the conditions in which life – and death – become meaningless, which is, in turn, to realise that the conditions of possibility for human social beings have to be understood, as the Worrora understood, in worlds of psychic well-being, without which, as Lommel understood, people cannot begin to live: meaningful ends require futures, preferably illusory.

## References

- Asad, Talal (ed). 1973. *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*. London: Ithaca Press.
- Austin-Broos, Diane. 2009. *Arrernte Present, Arrernte Past: Invasion, Violence, and Imagination in Indigenous Central Australia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 2003. Places, practices, and things: The articulation of Arrernte kinship with welfare and work, *American Ethnologist* 30(1): 118–135.
- 1998. Falling Through the 'Savage Slot': Postcolonial Critique and the Ethnographic Task, *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 9(3):295–309.
- Bauman, Zigmund. 2004. *Wasted Lives: The Outcasts of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Becker, Ernest. 1973. *The Denial of Death*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Beckett. (2005[1957]) *A study of Aborigines in the Pastoral West of New South Wales*. Sydney: Oceania Monograph.
- 1987. *Torres Strait Islanders: Custom and Colonialism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Biehl, João. 2001. Life in a zone of social abandonment. *Social Text* 68, Vol. 19, No. 3.

- 2005. *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Biersack, Aletta. 2006. Reimagining Political Ecology: culture/power/history/nature. In Biersack, Aletta and James B. Greenberg (eds). *Reimagining Political Ecology*. Durham, NC:Duke University Press.
- 1996. Local Knowledge, local history: Geertz and beyond, in Hunt, Lynn (ed). *The New Cultural History*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. 2006. *Engaging anthropology: the case for a public presence*. Oxford: Berg.
- Hymes, D. (ed). 1972. *Reinventing Anthropology*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- James, P.D. 1993[1992] *The Children of Men*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin. First published by Faber and Faber 1992.
- Kaberry, Phyllis 1935. Death and deferred mourning ceremonies in the Forrest River tribes of North West Australia. *Oceania* 6(1):33-47.
- Kayapo. 1994. *Disappearing World: Kayapo* [VHS]. Directed by the Kayapo.
- Lommel, Andreas. 1950. Modern culture influences on the Aborigines. *Oceania* 21(1). Accessed at <http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/pdf/lommel13.pdf>.
- Merlan, Francesca. 1988. *Caging the Rainbow: Places, Politics and Aborigines in a Northern Australian Town*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- 1981. Land, language and social identity in Aboriginal Australia. *Mankind* 13(2):133-148.
- Mimica, Jadran. (ed). 2007. *Explorations in Psychoanalytic Ethnography* New York : Berghahn Books Originally published as a special issue of *Social Analysis* (50(2) 2006).
- Morris, Barry 1989. *Domesticating resistance: the Dhan-gadi aborigines and the Australian state*. Oxford: Berg.
- Nguyen, Dan Thu. 1992. The Spatialization of Metric Time. The Conquest of Land and Labour in Europe and the United States. *Time & Society* 1(1): 29-50.
- Petri, H. 1969. Research in the Kimberley region, 1969, focusing on Australian Aboriginal ritual and mythology. *Anthropology News* 6(9):2-3.
- 1980. 'Pre-Initiation stages among Aboriginal groups of North-West Australia', pp.224-233 in R.M. Berndt and C.H. Berndt, (eds) *Aborigines of the West: their past and their present*, UWA Press, Perth.
- Petri, H. and G. Petri-Odermann 1970. Stability and change: present ay historic aspect among Australian Aborigines. In R.M. Berndt (ed). *Australian Aboriginal Anthropology*. Perth: University of Western Australia Press.
- Price, Richard 2008. *Travels with Tooy: History, Memory, and the African American Imagination*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Sahlins, Marshall. 2008. *Sahlins on Leslie White*. Marxism-Thaxis@lists.econ.utah.edu. Accessed 21/08/2010.

- 2000. Ethnographic Experience and Sentimental Pessimism: Why Culture is Not a Disappearing Object. In L. Daston, ed., *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, pp. 58-293. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 1995. *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, For Example*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- 1992. *Anahulu: The Anthropology of History in the Kingdom of Hawaii* (with Patrick Kirch), Vol. 1, Historical Ethnography (Sahlins); Vol. 2, Archaeology (Kirch). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 1985. *Islands of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stang, Carla D. 2009 *A Walk to the River in Amazonia: Ordinary Reality for the Mehinaku Indians*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Tonkinson, Robert 1991. *The Mardu Aborigines: Living the Dream in Australia's Desert*. 2nd Ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph 2002. The Otherwise Modern: Caribbean Lessons from the Savage Slot. In Bruce M. Knauft (ed). *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 2002. Adieu Culture: A New Duty Arises, in Richard G. Fox and Barbara J. King (eds). *Anthropology beyond Culture*. Oxford: Berg.
- 2003 *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Turner, Terence. 1992. In George W Stocking (ed). *Colonial Situations: Essays on the Contextualization of Ethnographic Knowledge*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Wagner, Roy. 1974 Are there social groups in New Guinea Highlands? In M.J. Leaf (ed). *Frontiers of Anthropology*. New York: Van Nostrand.
- White, Geoffrey M and Ty Kawika Tengan 2001. Disappearing Worlds: Anthropology and Cultural Studies in Hawai'i and the Pacific. *The Contemporary Pacific* 13(2):381-416.
- Worsley, Peter M. 1955. Totemism in a changing society. *American Anthropologist* 57(4):851-861.



# **Panel 6**

## **Perilous Indigeneity in South America**

*(Fri 26/03/2010; 2.30-3.00pm)*

### **‘Anthropokaluptein’: The End as Anthropological Revelation**

*Carla Stang  
University of Sydney*

*“A people are as healthy and confident as the stories they tell themselves.”  
Ben Okri*

#### **Abstract**

The Mehinaku Indians believe that the current state of affairs in the area where they live is destroying their lives and that if it continues the world will soon be completely destroyed. This paper will explore this belief and the methodological and philosophical ramifications of taking people seriously. The urgency of the apocalyptic scenario calls on anthropologists to reconfigure their relationships to their subjects. If instead of using theories that distance them from the people they work with, anthropologists in fact ‘believe’ them, that is, accept what people are saying on their terms, I will suggest that we are thus provided by the Mehinaku and others with thousands-of-years-old knowledge of how to best approach the prospect of the ‘end of world’ threats to all of our lives. At this critical time in history such anthropological insights also provide knowledge to other disciplines seeking to deal with the social and environmental crises of our times.

**Keywords:** indigenous; Amazon; apocalypse; interdisciplinary; environment.

## ***‘Original Things’***

The Mehinaku, with whom I do fieldwork, are an Amazonian people who live in the Upper Xingu area of Brazil that constitutes part of what is called the Xingu National Park (*‘Parque Indígena do Xingu’*), a large government-administered indigenous reserve. To the Mehinaku everything in this landscape is made from things called the *yeya*. Not only each human body and creature but every object in their surroundings is a copy or imitation generated from an ‘original’ called a *yeya*.

These *yeya*, or ‘original things’ still exist today at the bottom of waters and in the forest. I was told that there is literally a *yeya* for every kind of thing that exists, including even the things of White people such as cars and watches! There are *yeyas* for the birds and fish, ceramic pots and houses, jaguars and feather headdresses. It was first explained to me that a *yeya* is an exact, true-to-colour miniature version of its copies, from palm-size to forearm length. One of my informants, Arako, told me that his uncle Sepai, who is known as a very powerful shaman of the Yawalapiti community, kept two *yeyas* of an armadillo (*ukalu*) secretly hidden in his house. When they were children, Arako’s cousin showed these to him. Inside Sepai’s shamanic straw mat-roll for tobacco and other shamanic things, Arako saw the *yeya*. It looked exactly like an armadillo, except it was very tiny, the size of his hand, extremely delicate but moving, shivering and alive.

These *yeya* are the immortal, ‘true’ versions of all things that surround human beings in their world. Before the sun first shone, before the first human beings, there existed little people called the *Yerepēhē*. These tiny kindly folk were at home in the dark so with the first sunshine they hid in masks. These masks or ‘First-Forms’ as they might be called, are the *yeya* and are understood to exist now as the true/essential bodily form of spirits.

These *yeya* of the spirits are the archetypal forms from which inferior copies, the things of the world, are issued. The way the Mehinaku express this ‘firstness’ is with the Portuguese word for ‘true’ – *‘verdadeiro’*, as a translation of the Mehinaku *washē*. For example, a fish *yeya* is called *Kupatē-washē*, which means ‘fish-true’, distinct from an ordinary fish, which is called a *Kupatē-ēnai*, ‘fish-cape/clothing’. These ‘True-Fish’, the *Kupatēwashē*, live in the deeps of the waters and are the stars where the river shines (*‘o rio fica brilhante’*) in the sky, the Milky Way. They are the ‘chiefs’ (*‘chefes’* – *amunão*) that make regular fish, *Kupatē-ēnai*, for people to catch and eat. The latter ‘fish-copies’, the superficial replicas of the ‘first’, or ‘chief’ fish, were explained to me as ‘fish-shirts’ (*‘camisas de peixe’*). They have an ordinary, not particularly satisfying taste and are tougher in texture. On the other hand, on the rare occasion that a ‘True-Fish’ is caught, these are found to be fatter and softer, with a flavour that is extraordinarily delicious. These special fish can only be captured using white peoples’ poison, not with an arrow or hook as they know to avoid these.

The *yeya* of the *apapanye*, both in its form of the ‘first’ or ‘true being’ or as a miniature, is the body from which its copies issue. How the replica-skins actually come forth from the *yeya* is unclear, but there is defi-

nately some sense of organic reproduction, with the *apapanye-yeya* understood to relate to its *ėnai*-copies ‘as mother to children’, with an *apapanye-yeya* often referred to as, for example, ‘Mother of the Fish’. In all of this there is a sense of material connection between the *yeya* and their *ėnai*, the latter derived from and thus containing a trace of the former’s body, and associated with this, an emotional relationship of the caring parental kind.

Therefore the concept of ‘Masters of the Animals’ common to much of Amazonia has a particular take in the Mehinaku case wherein these entities constitute archetypes, a conception that in many ways is similar to that of Plato’s “Forms”<sup>1</sup>. The idea that the ‘inhabitants of the forest are created and controlled by their *‘donos/dueños’* (owners) and by their *‘mães/madres’* (mothers) is, as Viveiros de Castro has said, one of the ‘classical themes of Amazonian culture’ (1992: 345). The Mehinaku sense that ‘the “mother” looks after her species’ (Gow 1991: 79) is identical to other groups like the Piro for example. However, the notion that the species are imitations that issue substantially from an archetypal ‘mother’, appears to be peculiar to the Mehinaku.

## ***White peoples’ poison***

This sense of the paradigmatic constitution of the Mehinaku world is understood by them to be under threat specifically by the impact on the area where they live from the world beyond it. The progressive changes in the reserve have been of quite a different nature to what has gone on in other parts of South America. Unlike other indigenous peoples of the continent, the Mehinaku and other Xinguano peoples’ experiences of contact with the outside world have been largely indirect, through disease epidemics, the use of manufactured goods and interaction with restricted visitors from outside, rather than by direct day-to-day economic and political subjugation. Because of the types of contact they have experienced, and because of the way the communities have responded to successive crises by reconstitution and integration, in many ways the Xinguanos have thus far been able to maintain their lifeways to a far greater degree than most other Amazonian peoples.

Having said that, far from being the protected paradise the Brazilian government purports it to be<sup>2</sup>,

---

<sup>1</sup> Where the objects or forms, which humans see around them, are the replicas of ‘real forms’. Like the Mehinaku’s *apapanye*, compared to humans and their other copies Plato’s real forms are more beautiful and perfect than their copies; and like for the Mehinaku, in Plato’s conception there is the sense that humans should strive to make and nurture things in the likeness of the superior original archetypes. Also, akin to Plato’s description of the realm of forms (‘the true earth’), *apapanye* do also inhabit their own world. For more detail see Stang (2009).

<sup>2</sup> The large government-administered indigenous reserve with its firmly paternalistic protection policy, from its founding quickly gained an international reputation as the showcase for Brazil’s treatment of its Indian peoples, “providing an idyllic media image of painted Indians living in a protected wilderness in stark contrast to the conditions of most Brazilian Indians” (Hugh-Jones and Hugh-Jones 1996:13), an idealised image of an authentic “society of nations” of “peaceful peoples”, living in a paradise insulated from the outside world (Villas-Boas and Villas-Boas 1970:16). For an extensive history of the Park, see Pires Menezes (2000).

since its founding in 1961, the Xingu National Park has been subjected to continuous invasions and ongoing destruction. These have included rapid deforestation (especially for soya production, as well as logging, corn farming and cattle ranching), pollution of water and contamination of the fish that are the mainstay of the Xinguano diet. The most devastating threat is the Brazilian government's highly contested building and running of hydroelectric dams in the region during the last decade. According to the Xinguano peoples themselves, the situation has now become critical, bringing their leaders together in July 2007 to declare the crisis in an open letter to the Brazilian nation.

This is an overview of the ongoing deterioration of environmental conditions in the Xingu basin. I have described it in Western terms as "environmental degradation", including contamination of clean water with agro-toxins, the chopping down of oxygen-yielding trees, and the threat of the extinction of species. In Mehinaku terms this state of affairs concerns the harm and obliteration of the *yeya*. As discussed the *yeya* archetypes still exist shimmering and alive in the landscape. As the farmers and loggers cut away at the edge of the forest the *yeya* that live in those particular parts of the forest are destroyed or retreat in anger. Likewise the poisoning of the water by 'os Brancos', White people, threaten the *yeya* of the rivers, streams and lakes. As I mentioned above, the *yeya* of fish, which appear as big especially sweet-tasting fish, can only be killed using White peoples' poison. Arako, a Mehinaku man, explained to me that this is in fact why the number of fish are decreasing: that is, White peoples' poison has killed too many 'True Fish' and those that are left angrily cease to make their replica-fish and do not allow themselves to be caught. As the Mehinaku see it, the spirits are getting angry and even annihilated altogether. When the spirits are angry they refuse to issue from their bodies the imitations that are the things of the world. That is, the very 'building blocks' of the world are ceasing to work as they should and in some cases are being completely destroyed. Existence as the Mehinaku know it, is rapidly disintegrating and will eventually cease, as the archetypes of existence stop generating the substance of the world and possibly disappear altogether.

## ***Awitsiri, the beautiful way***

According to the Mehinaku, White people are destroying the world unwittingly. Principally because they lack knowledge of how to properly be and act, most importantly what the Mehinaku cultivate as a kind of consciousness. This way of being is called *awitsiri* or 'beautiful way' and is mostly marked by its quality of 'care'<sup>3</sup>. This is the 'state of mind' that nurtures all things towards which its attention is turned. This careful way of thinking/doing is evident in the manner in which people generally strive to conduct themselves. Some individuals are seen to be particularly successful at achieving this active state, and after a while it was apparent even to me, the calm and painstaking way certain people attended to even the smallest task.

An important part of this 'care' is the quality of attention given. Once, a young man, Maiawai, sought to teach me the importance of this way of doing things when in a hurry I was frustratedly pulling a zip that seemed completely stuck. He stopped me and motioned for me to watch as he sat and with slow, calm

---

<sup>3</sup> Reminiscent of Heidegger's 'sorge'.

deliberation attended to the task. He knew I was time-pressed and still he instructed me, 'devagar, Carla, sempre devagar', '...slowly Carla, always slowly'. The careful nurturing concentration is a form of the principle of child-rearing (*paparitsa*) that is extended to all matters in the world. It is the very opposite of the destructive effects of uncontrolled and thus rampant desire, since in *awitsiri*-consciousness, one's desires are restrained into the ultimate caring form. For example, the desire to open the zip is not allowed to go out of control as it was near to doing in me (that probably would have resulted in breaking the zip). Careful loving attentiveness to the task preserves the integrity of the thing (Maiawai closing the bag, all parts of it still intact). The importance of this intensive kind of 'paying attention' in fact has the tone of a 'spiritual' injunction wherein *Kamē*, the Sun, chastises a lack of concentration by giving the negligent person an injury. I found this out one day when Arako chided me for my scratched hands, cut from grating manioc, asking me whether I had been thinking about something else while I was working and laughingly scolding me that *Kamē* had punished me for this with those injuries.

One of the nurturing aspects of this 'caring' consciousness is a certain 'lightness'. In Mehinaku child-rearing, children are cared for in a comparatively less controlling manner than in the West. They are allowed to go and do what they want from the time they are old enough to wander off, only casually telling their mother or other caretakers where they are going. They work from a young age but only if they choose to. Literally, when they are young they are only held with the lightest touch and as they get older, from the time they can walk properly, they are hardly touched at all. There is an expansion of this delicate conduct into the quality of consciousness. There is a sense that, as in the treatment of children, to be too attached, to grip too strongly may be damaging, that this might be the case not only for the selves of children, but also that overly strong attachment in consciousness may also be destructive to the integrity of any entity one relates to, as well as the relations between entities.

Another aspect of the *awitsiri* consciousness is that the careful attention involved intertwines one utterly with all aspects of the worlds around<sup>4</sup>. To at every moment devote complete attention to the things and creatures one encounters is to be joined in strong relationship to all those entities.

White people, the Mehinaku say, do not live in an *awitsiri* way. They do not attend to the world around them with careful, light, nurturing attention that preserves the forms of things. They are not caring or attentive to the forces they share their world with; they are exploitative in their unrestrained desire, thus neglecting or utterly destroying relationships with other kinds of entities and often the things themselves. As we have seen in cases such as that of White man's poison killing the True Fish, the 'things' being destroyed are the 'First Things', the *yeya*, and when these are offended or damaged and destroyed it threatens the continuity of the aspects of existence of which they are the source; that is the threat of the end of the world according to the Mehinaku.

---

<sup>4</sup> As will be touched upon later, the Mehinaku understand there to exist a number of worlds or realities arranged in different configurations and in some places superimposed(see Stang 2009).

These are only a few aspects to the Mehinaku sense of their world ending. I will briefly mention one other. The Mehinaku have a sense of consensus realities, of how groups of the same soul kind with their collective perceiving uphold a certain manifestation of reality; how the Mehinaku and neighbouring Xinguanogroups are similarly human in perspective and thus manifest a reality of peaceful continuity of the world in its proper form<sup>5</sup>. Groups of souls of a wild kind such as other Indian groups and White people manifest realities of unrestrained desire that cause disintegration of the world and ultimately chaos. The invasion of other destructive realities can be in the form of the invasion of spirits, particularly at the time of eclipses, when the unnatural darkness causes dissolution of the forms of the world. The other way this happens is by the descent of the rainbow snake to earth where he wreaks havoc. Like the collapse of the circle of the arc of the rainbow to earth, the encroachment of White people is also perceived in terms of circles; as the collapse of the concentric boundaries of the worlds on the ground. The outermost ring – the wildness of White people – is penetrating inwards and if this continues there will be a complete implosion, the world of forms dissolving leaving a world of chaos, a return to the primordial darkness of spirits without form, desire utterly unrestrained.

## **Conclusion**

The very real possibility of global catastrophe by ecological devastation begs the question: 'who would have a good answer to all of this?'<sup>6</sup> The way that I see it is that if we are looking for more fruitful ways of living in the world we do not need to start scratching around making rudimentary things up. Anthropologists encounter a myriad of such lived cosmologies, and these are not skeletal outlines but elaborate thousands-of-years-old, tried-and-tested lived forms of knowledge; it is only a matter of attending to them, of taking them seriously. If the bankruptcy of the hegemonic Western worldview has brought us teetering to the edge, it is anthropology's special disciplinary position that I suggest may offer the alternatives.

In a sense the positive aspect of the apocalypse has already begun, that aspect which is the literal meaning of the word from the Greek apokalupsis, to uncover, reveal (from apokaluptein, apo- 'un-' + kaluptein 'to cover'). What has perhaps been uncovered at this time is the barrenness of the dominant worldviews, the rampant greed and heedless destruction of consumer capitalisms. In our anthropology there exists the tendency for taking a distance from peoples' experiences and simply using them as a spring board to elaborate preexisting Western theorisation. Peoples' lives, wherever they are from or of whatever character they are, simply become grist for the theoretical mill, interpreted through Western models that are based on other Western models, in a continuing fetishisation of Western conceptions. We are thus kept in a loop talking to ourselves, getting ever further away from the experiences of the people we started with.

---

<sup>5</sup> This is somewhat different to the idea of 'perspectivism' written about by Viveiros de Castro (1992; 1998) and others.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Taussig posed this question in his keynote lecture for the Anthropology and the Ends of Worlds symposium on March 25, 2010.



The alternative is to stay with the experiences, “returning to the stream of life whence all the meaning of the words and theories came from,” as William James (1947:106) put it. Instead of breaking up the details of people’s existence and putting them to the service of extrinsic explanations, one may attempt the opposite: to take Western language and its categories (the explanatory media mostly at hand) and make them the grist for the analytical mill, mixing and shaping them in order to construct a description of people’s experience. This is basically the phenomenological method in its simplest terms and what I have sought to do in the first part of the article.

Let us return to the question, ‘who would have a good answer to all of this?’ I suggest that making such painstaking renderings of different cultural experiences as described above allows people to explore other worldviews. It is then possible to see how these world views might be taken on as offering fruitful ways of being and healing the world at a time when the more dominant ways are poisoning it. For example, what if we anthropologists attempt to suspend disbelief and entertain in our own minds the possibility that for example, the Mehinaku are right and that there are in fact *yeya*, the mostly invisible archetypal presences? What if there might in fact be aspects of the world that we are not aware of and in our ignorance are neglecting and even harming, and thus damaging the landscape in as yet untold ways? After all, how many cultures have versions of these ideas, that there exist spirits or other such entities? The answer is: most cultural understandings in the world except for Western ones, where the dominance of spirits has disappeared only recently. And having taken people seriously on this point of the possible existence of unseen forces, people such as the Mehinaku provide us with thorough knowledge of how to best live with such forces, in what I have described as the *awitsiri* way, with keen awareness of the environment, lightly and with great care. In fact the Mehinaku have an entire system of creating relationships with the *yeya*, of not only not destroying but nurturing the essential and generative aspects of their landscape.

At this critical time in history these anthropological insights could also provide knowledge to other disciplines seeking to deal with the environmental and social crises of our times. Ecologists create models of the interconnectivity of thriving ecological systems. Famous scientists devise theories about how the planet might be more than what it has seemed to us since the so-called Age of Reason, describing the planet as having a sense of being, of spirit – for example Lovelock’s idea (2000) of the planet Gaia, a living being. And yet such theorists do not have to start from scratch. If they look over the disciplinary fence as scientists such as Newton did in the past, they will find anthropology’s riches containing wondrously elaborate versions of such ideas. Similarly, social psychologists might have a lot to gain by attending to anthropological material. They could learn from the Mehinaku sense of different groups of perspectives, manifesting different realities in the most material way, and thus the great care humans need to devote to the quality of our perspectives. They could consider the possibility that the Mehinaku are right about White People, whose unrestrained rampant desires may cause the End of the World to truly be nigh.

## **References**

- Gow, Peter. 1991. *Of Mixed Blood: Kinship and History in Peruvian Amazonia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- James, William. 1947. *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. New York. London. Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co.
- Lovelock, James. 2000. *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Okri, Ben. 1995. *Birds of Heaven*. London: Phoenix House.
- Stang, Carla. 2009. *A Walk to the River in Amazonia: Ordinary Reality for the Mehinaku Indians*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. B. 1992. *From the Enemy's Point of View: Humanity and Divinity in an Amazonian Society*. trans. Catherine V. Howard. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998. Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) 4, 469-488.

# Appendix

## *Symposium Welcome Message*

Friends and Colleagues! It is a pleasure to welcome you to our Symposium.

This will be, we are sure, one and half days of lively, varied and perhaps urgent discussion. “Anthropology and the Ends of Worlds” is theme to set the hares running and the sheep huddling! Each of our speakers and discussants knows the difficulties of wrestling with the contradictory emotions and recalcitrant epistemological and methodological questions it provokes.

We hope that all participants will feel eager to join in and share their wisdom. The global times seem increasingly dark to many, and if we can generate some collective light we will have taken a step beyond collective paralysis. Nor is the atmosphere of “endings” without promise.

Possibilities, too, live in the shadows, as do insights waiting to be born. For us at the Department of Anthropology, this is the beginning of a process that we expect will include other symposia and conferences in the future. We hope you will be there with us! We hope we will be there with us!

Linda Connor, Sebastian Job  
(Conveners)

## *Contributor Biographies*

### ***Connor, Linda***

Department of Anthropology  
The University of Sydney  
[Linda.Connor@sydney.edu.au](mailto:Linda.Connor@sydney.edu.au)

Linda Connor has a BA (Hons) (1974) and a PhD in Anthropology (1982) from the University of Sydney. She has undertaken research over three decades on healing, ritual and cultural transformation in Bali, Indonesia. Since 2003 she has been part of a research team undertaking research on environmental change and local communities in the Hunter Valley of NSW, and she is currently an investigator on an Australian Research Council-funded project on Climate Change, Place and Community: A Regional Ethnography of the Hunter Valley. She moved from the University of Newcastle NSW to the University of Sydney in 2009, and is currently Chair of the Department of Anthropology, and President of the Australian Anthropological Society.

***Job, Sebastian***

Department of Anthropology  
The University of Sydney  
sebastian.job@sydney.edu.au

Sebastian Job teaches in the Department of Anthropology, University of Sydney, specialising in political, psychoanalytic and philosophical anthropology.

***Kowal, Emma***

Department of Anthropology  
The University of Melbourne,  
e.kowal@unimelb.edu.au

Emma Kowal is a cultural anthropologist with two main areas of research: white anti-racism and indigenous governance, and the intersection of genetics, biomedicine and indigenous Australians. She is the co-editor of *Moving Anthropology: Critical Indigenous Studies* and her work has been published in *American Anthropologist*, *Social Science and Medicine*, *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* and in national and international medical journals. She is currently a National Health and Medical Research Council Postdoctoral Fellow in Anthropology at the University of Melbourne.

***Macdonald, Gaynor***

Department of Anthropology  
The University of Sydney  
Gaynor.Macdonald@sydney.edu.au

Gaynor Macdonald joined the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney 12 years ago. Her research and teaching focuses on the engagement of Wiradjuri Aboriginal people of central western NSW with their colonial subjectivity over time, with a particular interest in social and ontological change over time, and on governance and management. Recently she has extended her interests into the Kimberley region of the north west, working with health personnel on ways to strengthen intergenerational relations between women that can better support young mothers. She works as a consultant in contexts such as environmental/cultural impacts, land rights and native title, and organisational change.

***Marshall, Jonathan Paul***

Social and Political Change Group  
Technical University of Sydney  
Jonathan.Marshall@uts.edu.au

Is an ARC research fellow at UTS writing about technology and disorder. He has previously written about online life, in particular the uses of online gender. His ethnographic work focused on the internet mailing list 'Cybermind'. He has also written about the history of Western science and the occult, in particular alchemy.

### **McCall, Grant**

Department of Sociology & Social Anthropology  
The University of NSW  
g.mccall@unsw.edu.au

Grant McCall researches in the Pacific Islands and tries to teach at the University of New South Wales.

### **Peters, Robbie**

Department of Anthropology  
The University of Sydney  
Robert.Peters@sydney.edu.au

Robbie Peters is a lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney. His current research concerns issues of surveillance and mobility within Southeast Asian cities, with particular reference to female service sector workers.

### **Reuter, Thomas**

Department of Anthropology  
Monash University  
Thomas.Reuter@arts.monash.edu.au; thor2525@gmail.com

Prof Thomas Reuter is a Future Fellow (Australian Research Council) at the University of Melbourne's Asia Institute. After obtaining his PhD from ANU in 1997, he taught at Heidelberg University, held post-doctoral and QEII Fellowships at Melbourne, and a Research Fellowship at Monash University. He was President of the Australian Anthropological Association (2002-2005) and is the chair of the World Council of Anthropological Associations. Research has focused on Indonesian ethnology (Bali, Java, Kalimantan), New Social Movements, Religion, Political Anthropology, Social Organization, Status, Globalisation and General Theory. Thomas has authored seven books and numerous articles.

### **Stang, Carla**

University of Columbia  
carlastang@hotmail.com

Carla Stang received her undergraduate degree at the University of Sydney and was awarded the Frank Bell Memorial Prize for Anthropology for her studies there. In 2005, she took her doctorate in Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. Presently she is a Visiting Scholar in Cultural Anthropology at Columbia University. She carried out her ethnographic fieldwork in the Upper Xingu area of the Brazilian Amazon.

### **Taylor, Erin B.**

Department of Anthropology  
The University of Sydney  
Erin.Taylor@sydney.edu.au

My research in the Dominican Republic explores how residents of Santo Domingo's squatter settlements respond to their poverty and low social status through placemaking. While the middle class experience

increasing mobility resulting from skill demands and capital flows, the poor remain bound to their social position and locality. Although the city offers greater mobility for the poor than the countryside, it is also the site at which socioeconomic stratification is most profoundly experienced. I examine how residents who have limited material and symbolic resources invest value in place to survive in the urban milieu and attain a measure of socioeconomic mobility. I argue that control over space and the ability to invest it with value is essential to the poor in their attempts to contest a stratified global order as well as find a place within it. I am about to commence a new project on migration, technology and trade on the Dominican-Haitian border.

## *Time Schedule*

<b>Time Schedule</b>		
Friday 26 March 2010		
9.00 - 9.30 am	Tea / Coffee on Arrival	
<b>9.30 - 11.00 am</b>	<b>PANEL 1 Wanting and Denying the End</b>	<b>PANEL 2 Prophecy and Eschatology</b>
9.30-10.00 am	Erin Taylor	Thomas Reuter
10.00-10.30	Linda Connor	Grant McCall
10.30 - 11.00 am	Discussant Terry Woronov and discussion with auditorium	Discussant Yasmin Musharbash and discussion with auditorium
11.00 - 11.30 am	Morning Tea / Coffee	
<b>11.30am- 1.00pm</b>	<b>PANEL 3 Accepting Death</b>	<b>PANEL 4 The Future of Myth</b>
11.30am-12.00pm	Robbie Peters	Jon Marshall
12.00-12.30pm	Gillian Cowlshaw	Sebastian Job
	Discussant Neil Mclean and discussion with auditorium	Discussant Jadran Mimica and discussion with auditorium
1.00 - 2.00 pm	Book launch and lunch	
<b>2.30-4.00pm</b>	<b>PANEL 5 Aboriginal Ends</b>	<b>PANEL 6 Perilous Indigeneity in South America</b>
2.30-3.00pm	Emma Kowal	Carla Stang
3.0-3.30pm	Gaynor MacDonald	Veronica Quinteros
3.30-4.00pm	Discussant Viki Grieves and discussion with auditorium	Discussant Thiago Opperman and discussion with auditorium
4.00 - 5.30 pm	Final words	



