



‘Anthropology and Agency’ Honours Student Conference

Hosted by VUW’s Cultural Anthropology Programme

19 August 2013

10am-3pm

Murphy Building, Room MY 305

This conference is for VUW’s Cultural Anthropology Honours students to present papers based on independent research they are conducting for the course ANTH489: Research Essay. It is part of their coursework and provides students with an opportunity to present and gain feedback on their work in a constructive forum. While each student is undertaking a different project, agency is a common theme running throughout many of their research endeavours. Broadly defined, agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act (Ahearn, 2001:112).

Conference Programme

10.00am Welcome

ANTH489 Course Coordinator Lorena Gibson will briefly introduce the rationale for the 2013 Anthropology Honours Student Conference and introduce the speakers.

10.05-11.05am Session 1

Bridget McDonald: Fear No Evil: An Examination of Sorcery Related Violence in Papua New Guinea

Belief in sorcery and witch-craft is deep rooted in Papua New Guinea culture. Unexplained deaths in PNG are often blamed on sorcery or witch-craft. Sorcery related killings occur as a result of accusations of sorcery in cases where no other explanation for a death can be found. Currently, there is a reported increase in sorcery related violence there and this has received much media attention. Many organisations and individual researchers working in Melanesia are concerned that sorcery related violence occurring in PNG is gendered and that vulnerable women on the margins of society are more likely to be victims and suffer the brutal (often fatal) consequences of being accused of practicing sorcery or witch-craft. Because of the diverse nature of Papua New Guinea society and the isolation of some communities the full extent of sorcery and witch-craft related violence, and the number and gender of victims accused of practicing it is unclear as much of this violence goes unreported. Accessing accurate data is difficult. The underlying factors contributing to the reported upsurge in this violence are also unclear. This research examines available information to determine the extent to which this violence is a gender issue with women overrepresented as victims and explores reasons for the reported increase in sorcery related violence in PNG. The aim of the research is to help us gain a better understanding of why certain people in Papua New Guinea are singled out, victimised and subject to sorcery related violence.

Cameron Poole Smith: Re-Cycling: Reterritorialising the bicycle for altermodern agency

This paper explores some of the ways in which the bicycle has been reassembled to create agency. In it I argue that by reterritorialising the bicycle both physically and symbolically, new human/bicycle assemblages can be created which amplify the capacities of both parties. This in turn generates the potential for altermodern agency. This paper looks at the potential for altermodern activism, while contributing to a growing body of Deleuzian scholarship within Anthropology.

Caitlin Peterson: The Reanimation of Animism: The Re-emergence of the Ontology of the New Zealand Maori

This paper explores the animistic Maori ontology as it was perceived in the late 19th and early 20th century and subsequently how this ontology is being put into practice in contemporary society. I argue that despite the repressive nature of early discussions on animism by anthropologists such as Edward Tylor, and the manifestations of this in the work on Maori by Elsdon Best, the Maori ontology is currently being reasserted within the state as an alternative ontology. This can be seen in movements such as rongoā Maori in health and other initiatives by the Department of Conservation and Ministry for the Environment. I further argue that the revival in literature in animism, starting with Descola's publication in 1996 "Constructing natures: Symbolic ecology and social practice" is theory finally attempting to catch up with the practice of this alternative ontology. Previously such theories have been lagging behind but with work such as this of Descola, and more recently Tim Ingold, an attempt is being made to theorise what can already be found in practice. This paper therefore contributes to current discussions on animism as an alternative ontology as well as bringing a new element to these discussions through a specific focus on the New Zealand Maori, a society which has up until now been left out of discussions on contemporary animistic ontologies.

11.05-12.05pm Session 2

Tayla Hancock: "It's a fatty uprising": Analysing the fatosphere in New Zealand

Ethnographically, it has been frequently observed that fat phobia and thin worship are posited as Western culture-bound syndromes, representing health, self-control and beauty. This paper discusses the Fat Acceptance Movement in New Zealand and its aim in arguing fatness as a form of bodily diversity that should be tolerated and respected. Analyzing how the internet has become a medium for Fat Activists, the aim of this presentation is to initially illustrate how the movement is stressing 'fat resignification' (LeBesco 2004) by throwing off the yoke of biopolitical governance and secondly, to investigate the response to culturally and socially accepted visions of the ideal woman's figure through blog posts and internet forums about health, sexuality and body image. I conclude that such a body image review facilitates the production of biosociality which allows fat women to reflect and express agency over their body through the messages they are extending regarding image, physical abilities and sexuality, liberating her from a sense of powerlessness which is reinforced through the medical system.

Jared Commerer: A Sea of Meaning & the Problem of Agency: The Revindication of Real Powers for Real People Who Live in the Real World

British social theorist and critical realist, Margaret Archer, states, “There is a default setting on the human being: if we do not care enough about making things happen, then we become passive beings to whom things happen” (2000:2-3). For critical realists, agency cannot be considered a sole entity bound unto itself; instead, it is inextricably tied to notions of self, structure, reflexivity, and the ‘internal conversation.’ This paper outlines these ties in addition to the ways in which human agency is linked to concepts of natural, practical, and social identity from a critical realist perspective. Also considered is agency as a process of construction, choosing, and enactment (Wiley 2010:23), and the implications this has for emancipatory research objectives.

Meghan Stuthridge: Hijabs and Miniskirts: Adolescent girls and their perceptions of the West in Rabat, Morocco

Under the significant political changes occurring in the Middle East and North African regions following the ‘Arab Spring’ there has been a focus on the way in which women have used this period of transition to reject oppressive gender norms in favour of a renewed sense of selfhood and purpose. Social media and technology, with the ability for Muslim women to have greater access to ‘Western’ gender values, were presented as being pivotal components that shaped the Arab women’s uprising. In this paper I critique this view by reflecting on a conversation I had with Naima, a student in my French class, and her desperate need to escape Morocco immediately and move to America to become a famous singer. I show adolescence as being a crucial time for women in which they are presented with two options for their future: family or independence. I then illustrate how the effects of Western pop culture on shaping female identity and self-expression create positive and negative connotations about gender for both the girls and their community. I state that this is reflective of current Moroccan society, specifically the capital of Rabat, and its emphasis on maintaining equally both European and Muslim values. I conclude that within these distinctions, however, there remain fraught contradictions that cannot simply be ‘fixed’ by Western conceptions of womanhood.

12.10-1.00pm Lunch break

1.00-2.00pm Session 3

Hollie Russell: “You Are Not A Loan”; A Discussion of Debt and Student Activism

This paper explores the idea of debt as an influential factor on student’s decisions to participate in activism. It looks at debt from two different angles; the first discusses debt as a form of structural violence that discourages students from being active. Here, I look at issues concerning time, energy, and the future implications of participating in activism

whilst touching on the media as a key player in the presentation of the oppressive nature of debt. The second angle looks at debt in a completely different manner – as that which can inspire students to participate in activism. We can see this second angle reflected in Strike Debt, and the Rolling Jubilee Campaign, but also in movements closer to home such as We Are The University (WATU). Essentially this paper aims to show how students express agency by harnessing that which has usually been thought of as oppressive, and reconstructing it as inspirational.

Olly Guthrie: Punk Ethic: From the Streets to the Universities

The worlds of punk and academia appear to be in conflict. The university system and Western liberal education more generally, has long been critiqued as being an alienating and impersonal space that creates obedient and conforming subjects. On top of this, today's neo-liberal age sees our universities becoming increasingly run for profit at the expense of both student and staff experience, and the idea of universities as a public service to the community is being diminished. The morals and ethics within punk, such as the do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic, anti-mainstream, anti-authoritative, nonconformity, creativity/originality, and social change, can be used to resist and criticize these negative forces within university, just as punks have done in wider society for generations. This paper looks at the ways in which a punk approach to academia, through the creation of a 'zine, engages both the public and our participants with our work as anthropologists.

Tarapuhi Bryers-Brown: Taking on Toxic Inequality: Maori Health and Agency in Aotearoa

Indigenous peoples suffer from drastically poorer health and avoidable death rates than all other ethnicities in their respective national populations (Fong et al. 2003:136; Ring and Brown 2003: 404; Akau et al. 1998:235). The historical pathologization of indigenous peoples has contributed to the common beliefs and stereotypes that such suffering is caused by a genetic or cultural predisposition to disease, and thus reinforces the perceived need for them to assimilate into mainstream culture to attain, or deserve health and wellbeing. In contrast, many anthropologists and social scientists argue that these statistics represent the far-reaching effects of societal and economic inequality. Here in Aotearoa, structural violence has an alarming impact on the Maori population. This paper explores how the ongoing process of colonization and the residual symbolic violence has impacted Maori bodies. More importantly it will highlight some fields in which Maori are succeeding at battling such toxic inequality using an example from my ethnographic research. I will address how structural violence limits agency and how Maori exert their agency in resistance to such a force through relations of solidarity.

2.00-3.00pm Session 4

Callan Sait: "There's no such thing as unconditional"

This paper explores the concept of agency in a contemporary music setting, and is situated within the context of the internet – specifically the alternative funding, recording, and distribution options it provides artists. I discuss both the opportunities it affords as well as some of the difficulties it presents, via a case study of Canadian tech(nical)-metal band Protest the Hero and their recent crowdfunding experience. This paper expands upon - and bridges the gap between - existing literature on music as a form of agency and the internet as a tool for renegotiating agency and creative freedom.

Zachary Johnston: Perspectives of Gangs in New Zealand

This paper explores the role of agency in the life of a gang member, specifically, the idea that by joining a gang a person is using their agency to make a positive change in their lives. In this paper I argue against common held beliefs and stereotypes relating to gangs and their members, the most common of which being the idea that gangs are 'bad' and do not provide any positive function to society. By analysing how gang members utilise their agency I hope to provide a fair, critical alternative view to the misconceptions put forward by the media, and will show that joining a gang can, and does, have positive effects.

Patricia Chua: Communities On/Offline: Locus of Commonality

Negative views of the Internet's capacity for social interaction have long supported the idea that online communities cannot exist. A widespread reluctance to relinquish traditional place-bound notions of community has also contributed to the rejection of online communities as legitimate communities. In this presentation I will use the My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic fandom and the Bronies, older and generally male fans, as a case study as I argue that the Internet, can foster and support social interaction, has helped communities expand in numbers and accessibility which in turn has provided people with greater agency by further easing the process of finding, joining and participating in communities of their choice, and also that communities can thrive online for it is not a geographical place but points of commonality which lie at the heart of a community.

3.00pm Conference closing
