List of Abstracts:

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

Linda Connor,  
The University of Sydney

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, New South Wales
Without Ends Facing the End:
Of Aztec Revivalists and Anthropologists

Sebastian Job,
The University of Sydney

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

Perpetual Ends and Perpetual Beginnings:
Temporalities of Indigeneity in Australia

Emma Kowal,
The University of Melbourne

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

### Death as the end of a future

Gaynor Macdonald,
The University of Sydney

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

### Technology, Disorder and the Ends of Work

Jonathan Paul Marshall,
University of Technology Sydney

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

---

1 The project of which this work is part is supported by an ARC research fellowship.
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, millenialism, apocalypse*

---

**The end of the world at the end of the earth:**

**Retrospective eschatology on Rapanui (Easter Island)**

Grant McCall,
University of New South Wales

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*
Death and the City:
Mortuary rituals and urban renewal in Surabaya.

Robbie Peters,  
The University of Sydney

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.

The Time of Madness and the Return of the King: Prophetic Imagination and Societal Change in Indonesia

Thomas Reuter,  
The University of Melbourne

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: prophesy, imagination, social imaginary, rationality, politics, Java, Indonesia

Approaching the End

Carla Stang,
The University of Sydney

The Mehinaku Indians, an Amazonian people, believe, put simply, that the current state of affairs is destroying their lives and if it continues the entire world will soon be completely destroyed. This paper will look at the ways that such a belief can be approached, and the methodological and philosophical ramifications of taking people seriously.

¡Crisis is Coming!
Material Manifestations of Immaterial Ends

Erin B. Taylor,
The University of Sydney

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 a 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.