

AUSTRALIAN ANTHROPOLOGY. THE BEST AND WORST OF GLOBALIZED TIMES

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Contemplating Australian anthropology evokes Charles Dickens's well-known phrase: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

Best of Times

Beginning with a brief account of the former, Australian anthropology is situated within a postcolonial nation distinguished by human, geographic, economic, social, religious and ethnic intersections. The discipline's location within a humanities and sciences spectrum means that it is well placed to produce critical and meaningful interpretations of cultural and political life beyond and within its saltwater borders.

Present day Australia and anthropology also need to be contextualized by reference to the 1992 Australian High Court's determination known as the "Mabo Decision" (*Mabo*), which overturned the legal fiction of *terra nullius* and prior interpretation of Australia's colonization. Translated into the Native Title Act in 1993, *Mabo* represented the first time indigenous customary laws had been acknowledged by the state. It also established avenues of litigation and mediation whereby indigenous groups could lodge claims with a National Tribunal.

These events resulted in cultural, political and ethical shifts within national legislative structures and among certain populations concerned to reconcile a conflicted and often brutal history; they also resulted in expanding employment and educational opportunities for anthropologists. Anthropologists, for example, are required to carry out fieldwork as full-time workers or part-time consultants with native title claimant groups, as well as with those who oppose a claim, such as industry or government organizations. It is thus necessary that these anthropologists undertake collaborative research—especially with lawyers, historians and linguists—prior to presenting claim material in court or in situ and participating in a review of court cases.

Native title discourse has also fostered some intriguing intellectual inquiries: How do native title connections continue despite the impact of colonization and cultural change? What constitutes cultural evidence? It has also introduced university courses, many of which attract fee-paying students. More generally, and in part as a result of a fragmented postcolonial critique and the challenges prompted by feminism, indigenous groups, interpretive anthropology and cultural studies, anthropological researchers have turned to studies "at home," while retaining a continuing interest in studies betwixt and abroad, including in Southeast Asian and European settings.

Indicators such as these, alongside advances in an increasingly popular cross-disciplinary movement focused on interactions between humans and the environment, suggest that Australian anthropology affirms the "best of times" descriptor. Enrollments in anthropology and cross-disciplinary courses have been sustained (and in some cases, increased) and employment opportunities for graduates—especially in applied contexts—are more visible than they were ten years ago. Somewhat paradoxically, however, these productive engagements also embody a number of problems that accord with Dickens's "worst of times" insight.

Keeping in mind that complex disjunctures are capable of impacting interconnected persons, places, ideas and subject matter, one of the “worst” problems is that Australian universities (like universities elsewhere) have been undergoing economic transformations that, in many cases, result in their re-emergence as an almost corporate entity. A number of commentators describe this process as one where managerial emphases are progressively privileged over epistemological, pedagogical and ethical concerns. At a time when a conservative, antiintellectual federal government in Australia has reduced funding to higher education, this has culminated in academic staff being persuaded to spend time in already pressed conditions to prepare detailed applications for grants and consultancies to support their research. One of the outcomes of this process is that teaching, mentoring and individual tutelage have sometimes suffered, and conditions for a competitive —rather than a collegial— environment have surfaced.

That most anthropologists (in universities at least) are urged to apply for commercial awards and grants to assist research and teaching relief opens up unfortunate room for anthropological practice and knowledge production to be compromised; it also diminishes broader working conditions when some applications are successful and others are not. At another level of meaning, subject matter of apparent economic and intellectual benefit to the discipline in particular and universities in general do not always result in positive outcomes for the women, men and children with whom the research has occurred. For example, few native title land claims have been wholly successful: anthropology’s contribution to environmental scholarship can be overlooked when environmentalists and engineers prioritize the natural and built environment over human activities and aspirations, and few medical schools incorporate the cultural insights anthropology generates. Circumstances such as these engender professional and ethical conundrums for those who struggle with contrasting disciplinary methods and emphases, especially when the human situation is not identified as a primary concern.

Attention to complex issues such as these are sometimes raised by anthropologists in publications, electronic networks and conference venues, but such questions tend to remain in a cyclical form only, meaning the discussion rarely moves in new directions. Few result in a more substantive appraisal or sew the seeds for a revolution in knowledge that critiques anthropology’s foundations. In addition to the economic constraints that some anthropologists comply with and others resist, the lack of providing a forum for substantive discussion of these issues seems partly due to restrictions of time; it is also because Australian anthropology continues to struggle for a less self conscious and more independent identity and remains conflicted about its *raison d’être*.

Becoming Globalized

There is a tendency too —and in current fiscal and political circumstances, a powerful coercion— for Australian anthropology to revert to the hegemonic guise that spawned its existence. While undoubtedly there are valuable exceptions and contradictions to this claim, the potential to become internal, culturally-attuned participant observers is often overshadowed by a perceived need to explore instead how anthropology’s disciplinary borders might be expanded. This situation in Australian anthropology, one both facilitated and limited by globalization, hampers in-depth knowledge production, critical analysis of the discipline and fertile conditions for a range of different anthropologies to bloom. On the other hand, globalization has the potential to encourage the expansion of anthropological knowledge in ways that would not have occurred before. Writing as a member of the World Anthropologies Network (Nov 2005 *AN*, p 8), for example, I have become globally interconnected through technology, translation and travel to communicate with anthropologists in many geographically distant parts of the world —Brazil, Colombia, England, France, India, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Spain, Turkey and in North America— who sustain, challenge, compare and nourish my intellectual and practice aspirations in a way that does not always occur in more local or immediate circumstances. That most of my WAN colleagues speak

and write languages other than English (as well as English) means that they are regularly linguistically and culturally shifting from one relational context to another, a situation also reflected in the WAN website where a translatable and transformative dialogic is made possible. Providing access to ideas and findings through a range of languages marks a clear and critical commitment to anthropology's diversity in practice, as well as heralding how crucial to knowledge various forms of translation can be.

While these issues clearly resonate with those that occupy some other Australian anthropologists, in my case it has been in the process of opening up globalized Southern communicative networks and spaces where the possibility of a more accountable, reflexive and cross-cultural set of anthropologies has emerged. This analysis is particularly striking because the application of the very same technology in local Australian conditions sometimes works against productive engagement. For instance, email exchanges more regularly occur despite the possibility of an actual conversation. In these circumstances, a reliance on electronic communication (when other forms of communication are possible) tends to weaken collegiality and undermine the complex advantages of critical exchange, qualities seemingly central to a more processual, egalitarian and engaged anthropology.

Within a best and worst of times dialectic, considered within the processes of globalization, it appears that Australian anthropology has several intersected avenues requiring examination. Who should benefit, for example, from anthropological knowledge, in light of economic and social conditions and possibilities? Despite the impact of increasingly powerful corporate cultures, whether, how and to what extent the integration of anthropology with other disciplines is productive or compromises its integrity also requires attention. In circumstances that highlight anthropology's culturally transformative potential, issues such as these pose difficult challenges for many anthropologists today. Within the same best and worst of time scenario, of course, and in keeping with the ethos in which WAN and the World Council of Anthropological Associations (Oct 29 *AN*, p 5) developed, such potential might be realized to create the conditions for other anthropologies to emerge. These may not all foster the kind of transparent, diverse and nuanced forms of anthropology I'm encouraging here, but they will represent a form of difference, and therefore, an aspect of contemporary global life.