

# Book Reviews

## ***Uncertainty and Possibility: New Approaches to Future Making in Design Anthropology.***

Yoko Akama, Sarah Pink and Shanti Sumartojo,  
London: Bloomsbury, 2018, ISBN: 978-1-3500-027-1, 147 pp., Pb \$53.99.

Reviewed by Jane Shepard

(Part of the series *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Reviews of Anthropological Works by Non-Anthropologists*)

In *Uncertainty and Possibility: New Approaches to Future Making in Design Anthropology* authors Akama, Pink and Sumartojo provide a fascinating account of the theory and practice of uncertainty, which they investigate via a series of innovative and interdisciplinary *Design+Ethnography+Futures* workshops. Intentionally skewing the standard workshop format by setting ambiguous tasks, selecting unusual locations and steering away from academic conventions, the researchers disrupt the participants' personal and professional boundaries and explore their reaction to uncertainty. The creative methodologies deployed by the researchers, their exploratory approach and the novel ways they pursue knowledge production and applied research are particularly stimulating, paving the way for meaningful 'real-world' anthropological research interventions in social and political contexts.

Design anthropology combines design thinking and anthropological research with the intention of developing new insight into the study of everyday phenomena. While the underpinning principles of this approach are well established (see, for instance, Gunn and Donovan 2012), practical examples tend to be less well documented. In linking design to their intrinsic future-making agenda and providing a frank account of their research journey, Akama, Pink and Sumartojo make a welcome contribution to the field. While the authors do not intend to provide a reproducible methodological template for 'doing' design anthropology (indeed, such a thing would go

against the innate ethos of a project involving 'uncertainty'), their novel approach and perceptive mode of enquiry will inspire those interested in alternative ways of researching the everyday.

Divided into three sections, the first three chapters of the book situate the research themes – uncertainty, possibility and future-making – within a broader theoretical context. Uncertainty is framed as a technology for new insight which the authors investigate through a series of workshops purposely designed to take participants (a mixture of academics and professionals from a range of disciplines) out of their comfort zone. The workshop methods, discussed in the second section of the book, are characterised by an open and exploratory approach to participatory research, which is underpinned by demographic participation and documentation. It is in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, which deal with uncertainty in relation to disruption, surrender and moving on, respectively, that the innovative approach towards the planned – and occasionally unplanned – research activities really come to the fore. In Chapter 4, for instance, the authors describe how they disrupt participants' expectations, challenging their sense of privacy by inviting them to swap mobile phones in lieu of an ice-breaker and testing their response to limited or unusual instructions by introducing unfamiliar group exercises, such as co-creating a 'colourful' lunch for one another. Such activities were intended to elicit new knowledge rather than produce tangible results, and research findings took the form of video documentation, images, models, observations and other documentary evidence created and collected over the course of the workshops. The researchers note that not all of their strategies were successful. However, negative feedback reflecting participants' 'resistance, discomfort, or disengagement' (78) was valuable, contributing to new ways of thinking about people's feelings, our reaction to tentative situations and how we adapt to ambiguous circumstances. The authors' findings and the potential (or possibilities) for using this body of research to realise social and political intervention are discussed in the last chapter.

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Throughout this text, Akama, Pink and Sumartojo demonstrate how unconventional and experimental research activities can generate fresh ‘conversations’ and new ways of thinking about a given topic. Uncertainty, they argue, offers an important basis for critical enquiry, and ‘not knowing’ has academic merit. As such, this text should appeal to and reassure researchers working in interdisciplinary contexts who are open to the possibility of exploring new approaches, pushing methodological boundaries and applying their findings to achieve social and political change.

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## Reference

Gunn, W. and J. Donovan (eds) (2012), *Design and Anthropology* (New York: Routledge).

### *Media, Anthropology and Public Engagement*

Sarah Pink and Simone Abram (eds), New York: Berghahn, 2017, ISBN: 978-1-7853-3744-4, 228 pp., Pb \$29.95.

Reviewed by Yves Laberge

This overlooked book focussing on media practices and especially the new media – but also on some ‘new ways of employing media’ (1) – gathers nine chapters in applied anthropology, including selected case studies centered in the Basque Country, Scandinavia, India, the United States, Latin America, and elsewhere in our virtualised world. Editors Sarah Pink and Simone Abram’s substantial Introduction provides interesting insights regarding how the anthropological discipline can be perceived, con-

ceived and even appropriated nowadays; it also discusses ‘the sports of defining anthropology’ (14) and witnessing some emerging anthropological debates being borrowed, recreated and criticised outside the realm of academia, anthropologists and related experts (192). To sum it up in just a few words, this collection ‘looks at how changing public media and arts practices are enabling the emergence of a new public anthropology’ (1).

Some original ideas are developed: first, anthropological engagement is broadening to new audiences; second, messages and contents related to anthropology now circulate through new, easily accessible channels such as YouTube and Vimeo; and, finally, a new public anthropology seems to be emerging. In analysing these trends, many of the contributors employ a much-needed reflexive approach to how anthropology is conceived and done nowadays, showing an awareness of the distinctive but not uniform ways in which anthropologists work, for example when they highlight ‘a range of anthropologists in different (largely Anglophone) countries’ (1). The final chapters explore how the new social media create an alternative place for divergent opinions, different viewpoints and alternative voices that can gain exposure, visibility and a certain legitimacy that otherwise could not be expressed, circulated, achieved or adopted. One typical example of that opposition between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ is the shift between the ‘old anthropology’ and the newer, broader, less expert-driven anthropology made inside and outside academia. Alex Golub and Kerim Friedman observe that, until recently, ‘anthropological critique has [had] a harder time establishing its legitimacy in the public sphere’ (192). As a result, academic anthropology gets criticised in the general media, and this infrequent but growing type of commentary gets a wider audience and some legitimacy, as in an article by George Johnson from *The New York Times* (from 25 December 2007): ‘For the anthropologists, the exceptions were more important than the rules. Instead of seeking overarching laws, the call was to “conceptualize”, “complexify”, “relativize”, “particularize”, and even “problematize”, a word that in their dialect was given an oddly positive spin’ (192). Of course, the debate here is not to seek who is right and who is wrong, but rather to observe how such comments are given a broad exposure (and recognition) in the conventional and new media alike.

Here and there, we find descriptions of new phenomena being created and/or enhanced with the advent of new media, for example what is known

as ‘the culture of sharism’, a concept coined by Isaac Mao (164). John Postill’s chapter concentrates on the recent mutations in mainstream media as a result of being contaminated by non-mainstream messages, for example when Julien Assange’s Wikileaks affair (in 2010) created a global earthquake not only on the Internet, but also throughout the mainstream media (165).

Finally, Francine Barone and Keith Hart’s chapter presents their anthropology blog, the *Open Anthropology Cooperative* (OAC), which began simply as a group of Twitter friends. It rapidly became an online anthropology forum that criticised how the discipline in general was being institutionalised. Simultaneously, social media (or more broadly, Web 2.0) was accused of being ‘compromised by a bureaucratic capitalism whose command-and-control system and intellectual property regime continually provoke vigorous demands for more open access to information and for the democratisation of its production, distribution and consumption’ (200).

Throughout the book, some general remarks, diagnostics and critiques are most rewarding, for example about anthropology’s apparent loss of expertise and influence: anthropologists ‘are losing control of our master-concepts like “culture” to other disciplines, and even to web moguls who are not afraid to engage with popular media’ (216). Even with a stint of overgeneralisation, Francine Barone and Keith Hart’s conclusion is welcome but also symptomatic: ‘Anthropologists, it seems, suffer from an inability to catch up with a changing world, at the same time as they meticulously document it’ (216).

Even though *Media, Anthropology and Public Engagement* does not pretend to be exhaustive, scholars with an interest in social media will find here some valuable intuitions, ideas and demonstrations.

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### ***Contingent Citizens: Professional Aspirations in a South African Hospital***

Elizabeth Hull, London: Bloomsbury, 2017, ISBN: 978-1-350-02775-6, 264 pp.

Reviewed by Julia Vorhölter

Elizabeth Hull’s comprehensive monograph focusses on the changing experiences of nurses at Bethesda, a small rural hospital in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Her account, based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork and archival research, stretches from the early 1930s, when the hospital was first set up by the Methodist mission, through the Apartheid era, when it was taken over by the homeland government, to the contemporary phase under ANC-led majority rule. While the book sometimes resembles a classic hospital ethnography, Hull’s main aim is to analyse the changing status of public sector workers like nurses in post-Apartheid South Africa. Thus, her study primarily contributes to anthropological debates on belonging, citizenship and identity, class politics and the state in Africa rather than to medical anthropology per se. However, it is also relevant for academics, practitioners and policy-makers in the field of global health, as the book successfully captures the challenges faced by public health-care systems in an era of neo-liberal orthodoxy and New Public Management.

The book addresses the complex relationships between state and citizens in South Africa and reveals fundamental challenges, paradoxes and tensions in the struggle to establish a just, democratic post-Apartheid society. The heterogeneous field of nursing is fruitful for exploring these issues. In society at large, the nursing profession has long been associated with privilege, and nurses have been key representatives of a (female) Black middle class. In their immediate professional environment, however, they have commonly occupied subordinate positions – in relation to doctors and White nurses during Apartheid, and nowadays to bureaucrats, hospital managers and patients. Hull identifies tensions and struggles that result from nurses’ complex – gender, race and class – positionalities, in particular the difficulty of reconciling professional ethics and the moral duty of care with managerial demands and liberal democratic principles of accountability, transparency and ‘rights’. She gives an empathetic portrayal of nurses’ day-to-day struggles for recognition, status and respect, providing many examples of how they find new ways of belonging and realise ‘projects of

care' despite feeling stressed, unappreciated and overwhelmed by ever-increasing paperwork and a risky, precarious, crisis-ridden work environment.

The first chapter outlines the history of Bethesda Hospital and analyses its changing relationship to the state, effectively conveying the deeply political nature of health care. Chapters 2 to 5 analyse how the nursing profession has been affected by new discourses on accountability, patient rights and liberal democracy as well as new opportunities for wealth and status accumulation that came with the post-1994 transition. Hull shows that many of these changes, rather than being celebrated, are met with scepticism by her interlocutors. Inside the workplace, nurses increasingly experience anxieties due to a tough audit regime; outside the workplace, their status as middle-class professionals is challenged by those profiting from more lucrative, and less rule-bound, money-making opportunities. Hull describes a widespread sense of nostalgia for the past amongst older nurses. Somewhat paradoxically, they remember the Apartheid and homeland era as a time when nurses were respected, had more autonomy despite rigid hierarchies, and adhered to professional ethics. This is seen in sharp contrast to the perceived present-day crisis and moral disintegration of the health-care system, in which money and managerial rationalities seem to have become more important than care and commitment. The book portrays some of the conflicts, especially along generational lines, that are fuelled by these changes. Older nurses at Bethesda for whom nursing represents a professional and religious calling rather than simply a job criticise younger nurses for their lack of discipline and dedication. They feel threatened by an increasing 'medicalisation' of nursing, whereby science-based knowledge and skills have become more important than older forms of moral care. The final chapter discusses new avenues that are available to nurses to attain status and respectability, a prominent one being international migration. Alternatively, new religious movements offer new forms of belonging that challenge established professional hierarchies and ethics.

The broad focus of the analysis – covering debates on citizenship, audit regimes, ethics, morality, care, middle classes, state bureaucracies, religion, migration and nursing – is both a strength and a weakness. While it provides a very comprehensive insight into the past and contemporary struggles of public

sector workers like nurses in South Africa, some of the academic debates surrounding these issues are taken up rather superficially. Recent anthropological work on care and ethics, for instance, is hardly discussed, although both are key concepts in the book. Furthermore, I sometimes found the main argument hard to discern. Hull's central focus seems to be on the ambiguities and contingencies of citizenship. She claims that, in contrast to former times when work was a key source of identification, nowadays 'people are drawn into the field of citizenship on the basis of new criteria' (202). Although I can follow this line of argument, I was not convinced that the struggles of Hull's interlocutors are really centrally about citizenship, especially because the term does not come up in the ethnographic material. Instead, and as Hull herself also notes, they seem to be about new moral and aspirational identities and contested forms of belonging based on gender, religion, political allegiances, class, race and work status. The key question, then, may be less about what it means to be a South African and more about how to be a respected, ethical member of a community, however it is defined.

I would have liked to learn more about the motivation and context of Hull's research and her reasons for selecting Bethesda Hospital as a field site. I also would have welcomed more ethnographic vignettes of the day-to-day practices at the hospital, in particular the relations (and tensions) between nurses and patients, which are mentioned several times. Hull notes, however, that the mistrust generated by the new audit regime in the hospital initially made it hard for her to establish trust and rapport with the nurses. Maybe this explains why – for good *ethical* reasons — she chose a slightly more detached style of ethnography.

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