“But the world, mind, is, was and will be writing its own runes for ever.”

James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 1939

Everyone, it seems, is talking about creativity these days. Bill Gates calls for a “creative capitalism,” capable both of delivering profits and of alleviating the plight of the world’s poor; educational institutions offer courses in “creative leadership”; design and marketing firms offer a variety of “creative solutions” to prospective clients. Nonetheless, what is understood by creativity often seems to amount to little more than a purely practical facility for problem solving, attuned to the perceived needs of contemporary global capital. It is too easy, however, to denounce the corporatization and commodification of creativity as symptomatic of our present geopolitical moment, a move that, arguably, succumbs to its own kind of reductionism. Perhaps the opportunity presents itself instead to pose a different set of questions. What does it mean to create? Who or what could be said to create? God? Artists? Evolution? Markets? The Dialectic? Do things “just happen” and if so is that a kind of creativity? Taking storytelling as its point of reference, this essay considers the notion of creativity as it applies both to the productions of the human imagination, especially stories, and to the making of the material universe. In so doing, it seeks to outline an experimental, multiagentive, and pluralistic vision of creativity as an alternative to some of the more restricted (and restrictive) understandings of the term proposed, variously, by aesthetics, business economics, evolutionary science and, not least, anthropology.
Mircea Eliade once wrote that, in “archaic” societies: “Every creation repeats the pre-eminent cosmogonic act, the Creation of the world” (1971:18). He was referring to the way in which new beginnings in the human world—the turning of the year, the birth of a child, the inauguration of a king, the founding of a city—were understood as imitations of sacred “archetypes” established in the “Great Time” of origins by the actions of divine beings responsible for the creation of the universe. Although I shall have more to say later about cosmogenic narratives and their latter-day retellings, my account differs from Eliade’s in at least three key points of emphasis. First, in so far as my account is comparative in scope, I make no a priori distinction between “archaic” and “modern” conceptions of the universe. Second, I am concerned with human creative acts less as imitations of events taking place in a bygone time of origins than as participating in ongoing material world-forming processes. Third, I view creativity not as an attribute of individuated human or supernatural agents but as a relational process operating between bodies of different kinds (“animate” and “inanimate”) and blurring their contours.

When anthropology has broached the subject of creativity, it has often done so with a view to shifting the focus of discussion away from the aesthetic realm to consider instead the ways in which creativity is more broadly implicated in forms of everyday practice, including the shaping of anthropological knowledge (Appadurai 1996; Atkinson 1990; Crapanzano 2004; Hallam and Ingold 2007; Hastrup 1995; Lavie et al. 1993; Liep 2001; McLean and Coleman 2007; Wagner 1981). This has often tended, nonetheless, to entail an exclusive preoccupation with cultural creativity as a specifically human mode of engagement with the world: that is, regardless of how creativity is defined, it is human beings who alone are shown to practice creativity. When “nature” appears in such accounts, it is usually in the guise of cultural representations (e.g., “cultural imaginaries” of landscape or place) that remain conceptually and analytically distinct from the material realities to which they refer. Anthropological treatments of creativity have thus tended to engage the nonhuman only as mediated through language and culture, creativity being understood, implicitly or explicitly, as the processual encompassment by culture of the contingent, the new, and the unforeseen. What has tended to remain unthought is the possibility of a creativity issuing from this putative outside, a creativity immanent to the material substance of the universe and therefore not dependent on the human assignment of cultural meaning.

Assumptions regarding the specifically cultural character of creativity have already been challenged by a now extensive, cross-disciplinary literature seeking
to reproblematize the distinctions between “nature” and “culture” or “nature” and “society” that have played a major role in shaping both the current division of academic disciplines and the problematic of representation on which much scholarship in the humanities and social sciences continues to rely. Anthropologists have argued that a dichotomy between nature and culture does not appear to be recognized in many non-Western contexts (Descola 1996; Hallowell 1960; Howell 1996; Ingold 2000; Strathern 1988). Science studies (and in particular the approach sometimes referred to as actor-network theory) has demonstrated that even in the case of self-styled “modern,” Western societies, the definitional separation of nature and culture, along with the institutional separation of the natural and social sciences, has often served to obscure the degree of actual trafficking between the two spheres, along with the resultant proliferation of nature–society “imbroglios” and shifting associations of humans and nonhumans (Callon 1986; Callon and Law 1995; Latour 1993, 2004, 2005).

At the same time the intellectual underpinnings of the nature–culture binary have been called into question by a variety of thinkers, including Gilles Deleuze (1994), Donna Haraway (1991, 1996, 2007), Michel Serres (1995, 1997), and Isabel Stengers (1997, 2005), many of whom have called for the invention of new vocabularies capable of rearticulating the relationship between nature and culture in nonoppositional terms. Maňuel De Landa, for example, has argued that such diverse fields as economic history, geology, and biological evolution can be described in terms of analogous form-engendering and form-dissolving processes (De Landa 2000). Among anthropologists, it is perhaps Tim Ingold whose work has sought most explicitly to link the discussion of creativity to recent calls for the rethinking of the nature/culture opposition. Ingold argues that, in so far as creativity is always a relational activity carried forward in the world, it is best understood, not as a “faculty” exercised by particular human individuals or groups, but rather as immanent in the “life process” itself, understood as the entire field of relations between humans and their environments (Ingold 2000:339–348, 418–419).

Responding to these provocations, I argue here that it is indeed possible to conceive of creativity beyond the field of human agency and subjectivity—for example, as the self-organizing activity of material processes, and therefore as belonging as much to “nature” as to “culture.” I define creativity broadly as the bringing forth of new material, linguistic, or conceptual formations or the transformation of existing ones and as calling, not for a “cultural poetics,” but for a more broadly conceived poetics of making (poesis, in its most inclusive sense),
encompassing both the natural and cultural realms as conventionally designated, a poetics capable, for example, of articulating the stories human beings tell with cosmogonies detailing the coming-to-being of the material universe. I contend that human beings in various times and places have intuited such a continuity between human creativity and the processes shaping the material universe and that these intuitions have found a variety of expressions through mythology, folklore, literature, art, philosophy, and science. I further suggest that thus extending the purview of creativity beyond the human realm allows us to envision creativity in terms of a generative multiplicity that resists articulation in binary oppositional terms and that demands therefore to be thought as ontologically prior to any possible differentiation between the domains of nature and culture, or between reality and its cultural–linguistic representations. This challenges us to reimagine not only the relationship between nature and culture but also the problematic of representation itself. Finally, I propose that such a reimagining might proceed precisely from such an enlarged understanding of creativity and I consider some of the philosophical and writerly implications of this claim for anthropology as a discipline concerned preeminently with exploring and documenting the varieties of human being-in-the-world.

This essay does not, however, attempt to furnish causal or structural explanations. It does not seek to account for creativity, either by reducing it to a different order of reality (whether it be capitalism or neurophysiology), or by explicating its shifting meanings across successive social and historical contexts. Instead, it aims to suggest and, more ambitiously perhaps, to embody one possible way of understanding and practicing creativity. It does so by juxtaposing three contrasting yet interlinked scenarios, comprising multiple stories and tellers. These are offered less as case studies documenting an already established object of inquiry than as an experimental conjuration of possible trajectories for future exploration and imagining. The first of them addresses the question of origins as it pertains both to the material universe and to the place of human beings in it.

**FIRST SCENARIO**

Try to imagine a time before or outside of time as we are accustomed to conceive of it. Such a time would not be the quantified and calibrated time with which we are familiar—calendrical time, clock time, historical time, labor time. Imagine instead a time of flux and metamorphosis, when the contours of the physical world are not yet fixed and stabilized. Ancestors emerge from the ground. They rejuvenate by sloughing their skins. They transform themselves into other shapes
and back again. Human beings, animals, plants, and rocks engage in a constant interchange of forms. Flying canoes glide through the air.

Such is Malinowski’s (1922) characterization of the “mythical world” of the Trobriand Islanders, a time distinct both from the present and the directly remembered past, when, as he writes, “all sorts of events happened which do not happen nowadays, and people were endowed with powers such as present men and their historical ancestors do not possess” (301–302). Nonetheless, mythic time is understood, Malinowski claims, as giving rise to the world as it currently exists: to features of the physical landscape, animals and plants, as well as to human beings and many of their social institutions. “Nature” and “culture” as the modern West has been accustomed to define them, appear to be coextensive here—the first human beings emerge already equipped with ornaments, trinkets, gardens, cooking vessels and, it appears, with language, in the guise of certain magical incantations and formulae, credited with springing from the ground along with these first ancestors (305, 398–399).

The New Zealander Reo Fortune, who conducted field research in Dobu, to the south of the Trobriand Islands, in the late 1920s, gives an account that closely parallels Malinowski’s. For the Dobuans, Fortune noted, metamorphosis was a central motif in creation stories. Indeed, creation and metamorphosis appeared to amount to the same thing. Features of the contemporary world were understood to derive from the successive metamorphoses of ancestral beings:

Creation in Dobu is explained by the metamorphosis of some natural thing into another. Language is specialized to express the conception of metamorphosis. . . . In the beginning of time various human persons emanua nidi, changed into birds. Thus birds came to be. Inconsistently enough, various birds hatched eggs from which issued the first human beings upon earth. . . . Various human beings changed into tree form, others became spirits such as those who now blow breath from their mouths, so making the winds. From one mango tree the sea issued, and various sea monsters promptly carved the sea channels and straits through the land. Fire came from the pubes of an old woman. Yams came and grew from humans in metamorphosis. [Fortune 1932:94–95]

The Swiss ethnographer Paul Wirz, writing in 1922, notes that among the Marind-anim of southern New Guinea (lying to the southwest of Dobu and the Trobriand archipelago), the term Dema was used to refer both to the mythic time of origins and to the ancestors themselves, who were credited with the power to transform themselves into any animal or object:
The Dema (they are also called Amai, that is, grandfathers, forbears) were beings of double (human and animal) form, endowed with unusual and extraordinary powers, which were supernatural. In addition to everything else they possessed the power of self-transformation and could perform all sorts of very strange actions which are no longer possible for men who live now. All that existed then was dema; real men, plants and animals (that is, as we know them today) were not yet present on earth. On the contrary, all creatures and all things in nature then existing still possessed powers which, in the course of succeeding generations, they lost. They thus became the men, animals and plants familiar to us today.

Their work completed, the Dema metamorphosed into features of the physical landscape or took up residence in the earth, sea, or sky. The places where the Dema still lingered were known as Dema-mirav, that is, Dema-sites. Many of these, Wirz noted, were totemic centers, where the species descended from the original creatures produced by the Dema existed in large numbers and as such were the subject of myths concerned with the presence in the locality of particular animals, plants, or natural objects (Wirz 1922, vol. 1: ii:10, 15, 137, 184; vol. 2: iv:73).

The ethnographies of Malinowski, Fortune, and Wirz would later furnish material for Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s philosophical speculations regarding the “mythic world” of the Australian and Papuan natives (1983). Although Lévy-Bruhl’s account draws mostly on ethnographic studies of native Australia and Melanesia from the 1920s, he argues too that the notion of an origin- or creation-time, identified in his sources by a variety of indigenous and European names (Alchera, Ungud, Dema, Urzeit, Dreaming, etc.) and populated by metamorphic ancestral beings, combining human and animal characteristics, is of much wider, indeed universal, provenance. Lévy-Bruhl’s work is little read in anthropology today and has been much criticized—notably by Durkheim (1915) and Evans-Pritchard (1937)—for presenting a view of “primitive” thought as logically incoherent and lacking in concepts. In fact, Lévy-Bruhl himself, in his posthumously published Carnets, explicitly rejects such a view. Instead he argues that the features he had earlier described under the heading of primitive mentality, in particular the notion of “participations” (a continuum of powers and agencies encompassing both animate and inanimate beings), are permanent structures of the human mind, albeit obscured in the case of modern Western societies by the ascendancy of principles of scientific reason (Cazeneuve 1972:22).
It is not my aim here, however, to defend Lévy-Bruhl against his critics. Instead, I wish to focus on a particular aspect of his argument: his characterization of the mythic word in terms of “fluidity”—a sense that boundaries between species and kinds are not yet fixed and that, as he puts it, “anything at all can happen and at any moment” (Lévy-Bruhl 1983:57). The mythic world appears as one of pure and unconstrained potentiality, where categories and kinds are not yet firmly established, in contrast to the more fixed and determinate contours of the actual, existing world, to which in gives rise and in which stories detailing the exploits of mythic ancestors are recounted. Lévy-Bruhl points out too that many of his sources register a striking ambiguity in the relation between mythic time and the present or recent past. Mythic time, he notes, is at once past and yet not fully past. On the one hand, mythic time is associated with magical transformations and metamorphoses that no longer take place in the present. On the other hand, not only is the existence of human beings and the present configuration of the physical landscape directly attributed to the actions of mythic ancestors but the ancestors themselves, as Wirz and Fortune also note, retain the capacity to intervene directly in the present. Wirz, for example, writes that the Dema were associated in particular with unusual land formations, chasms, uplands, swamps with sandbanks or gravel deposits, where strange noises could sometimes be heard. In rivers the Dema could cause unpredictable currents and eddies; in the sea they could raise waves that posed a danger to canoes (Wirz 1922, vol. 1: ii:14).

The once ubiquitous power of creation and transformation that characterized the mythic age was also retained to a limited degree in the present, both by particular animals and plants and also by certain human beings—notably sorcerers and magicians—whose power was understood to derive from their privileged access to a metamorphic potentiality that once ran through all things (Lévy-Bruhl 1983:60–61). Malinowski writes that, in the Trobriand Islands, magic afforded a privileged point of contact between the present and the mythical world. The powers of transformation and metamorphosis possessed by the mythic ancestors were attributed to their knowledge of magic, a knowledge surviving to the present only in abbreviated and truncated form in the guise of rites and verbal formulae handed down from generation to generation and credited with emerging from the ground with the ancestors. If those living today could attain a full knowledge of magic like that of the ancestors, they would again possess powers comparable to the ancestors themselves: “If the magic could be recovered, men would fly again in their canoes, they could rejuvenate, defy ogres and perform the many heroic deeds which they did in the ancient times” (Malinowski 1922:303).
Mythic time could be revisited too in the guise of ritual enactments involving the direct imitation of ancestral beings. The German missionary and ethnographer Carl Strehlow describes a number of native ceremonies among the Arrernte and Kukatja (“Loritja”) people of central Australia, in which the participants don costumes and imitate the behavior and movements of totem ancestors as beings endowed with a dual animal and human character. He describes an emu ceremony, performed at night and involving a single performer:

He is decorated with a broad black band which runs from his knees to his forehead, outlined with a line of down. Round his middle there is a broad black band, also outlined with down. On his head he wears a tonka with a long emu feather stuck in it. . . . The actor stands in the performing area with his hands placed on his back, bending the upper part of the body a little forward, mimicking an old emu just arrived at a drinking place. [Strehlow 1910:34; see Lévy-Bruhl 1983:119]

Spencer and Gillen, who conducted research in the same region, also describe a number of such ceremonies. They write:

At first glance it looks much as if all they were intended to represent were the behavior of certain animals, but in reality they have a much deeper meaning, for each performer represents an individual who lived in the Alchera [the mythic time of creation. . . . It is as a reincarnation of the never-dying spirit part of one of these ancestors that every member of the tribe is born, he, or she, bears of necessity the name of the animal or plant associated with the Alchera ancestor. [Spencer and Gillen 1927:187]

Graphic images could also provide a connection to mythic time, as in the case of the rock paintings described by A. P. Elkin. The paintings in question are to be found in a series of caves in the North Kimberley district of North-West Australia, where Elkin carried out about field research in 1927–28. They show stylized human figures featuring faces with no mouth, surrounded by a broad headband in a horseshoe shape, along with a number of bird and animal figures. Elkin notes that the paintings were referred to by local tribes-people as wondjina or ungud, the former term referring specifically to rain and, more generally to a regenerative and reproductive power in nature and human beings, the latter to a far-off mythic time, associated with the origins of present world. Elkin was unable to discover the origins of the paintings, being told by his informants that the images had “made themselves.” He noted, however, that the paintings would be retouched
on particular occasions, for example, at the beginning of the wet season to ensure the coming of rain. Retouching was understood as a way to ensure the fertility both of humans and of the various animal species depicted in the paintings. Elkin writes: “The efficacy of the special paintings is associated with the fact that they are ‘Ungud,’ that is, belong to the far-past ‘creative’ time. Preservation of continuity with this time is essential for present prosperity; thus, the form of the head must not vary, and the figure, in theory at least, should only be retouched, not painted afresh” (1930:279).

Finally, there were the myths themselves, the stories recounting the exploits of the ancestors, tracing their journeys and metamorphoses and with them the coming-into-being of the present-day physical landscape. The transmission and telling of such myths was, Lévy-Bruhl noted, frequently surrounded by secrecy and ritual protocols (Lévy-Bruhl 1983:11). Knowledge of them was often restricted to initiated males, or else to members of particular totemic clans and their recitation was often a feature of specific ceremonial occasions (Elkin 1932). The myths, as a number of scholars have noted, were themselves held (and in many cases continue to be held) to furnish a direct, rather than a merely referential link to the time of creation. Fred Myers notes, for example, that among the Pintupi of Western Australia’s Gibson Desert the term “dreaming” is used interchangeably to refer both to specific stories and to the creative epoch of which they form a part (Myers 1986:48). A sense of the complex interrelationship between mythic time and the present is reiterated in the remarkable book Reading the Country, a collaboration between Krim Benterrak, a Moroccan-born visual artist, Stephen Muecke, an anthropological linguist, and Paddy Roe, an aboriginal storyteller. They write that:

The dreaming is not a set of beliefs which is being lost because it is no longer valid, it is rather a way of talking, of seeing, of knowing, and a set of practices, which is as obtuse, as mysterious and as beautiful as any poetry. Reading its present and public forms as religious, as apolitical, and as the relics of past customs is to deliver it a deathblow. Except where it appears in books, embalmed as it were, it depends on people living in the country, travelling through it and naming it, constantly making new stories and songs. [Benterrak et al. 1996:19]

The storyteller, whose movement through the landscape recapitulates that of the ancestors themselves, is understood not simply as recounting events from an unimaginably distant mythic past, but as participating in an ongoing (and for these authors eminently political) process of creative transformation unfolding in the
present. The invocation of the time of origins does not amount to a repudiation of history (as Eliade once suggested) but is rather a matter of accessing a creative, metamorphic potential that remains contemporaneous with, yet irreducible to the unfolding of linear, historical time (Eliade 1971:34–48). The contemporary retelling of stories relating to the time of creation can thus be understood as recapitulating and extending the “stories” traced by the bodies of the ancestors themselves, through which the present world and its various human and other inhabitants came into existence.

This raises the further question of how we are to understand the relationship between the time of creation, the stories told about it by the native peoples of Australia and Melanesia (and elsewhere) and subsequent retellings of those stories by Malinowski, Fortune, Wirz, Lévy-Bruhl, and their successors. It is important to note, first of all, that, as Sam Gill, Elizabeth Povinelli, and others have pointed out in the Australian case, there are often important and politically charged discrepancies between anthropological and native accounts (Gill 1998; Povinelli 2002). Anthropological redactions of aboriginal stories have all too often sought either to “explain” their sources through recourse to such familiar social scientific concepts as ecological adaptation, group solidarity or “worldview” or else to recast them in the no less confining idioms of liberal multiculturalism, thus refusing the manifestly ontological claims that the stories themselves advance. Nonetheless, anthropological accounts, for all their limitations, have served at the same time to disseminate an awareness of these stories among a wider, reading public, both in Australia and farther afield, and their reception by that wider public has been a complex and varied one that cannot, therefore, be accounted for solely in terms of the history of unequal power relationships framing the ethnographic encounter.

It is on these grounds that I venture to suggest a different understanding of the relationship between creation stories and anthropological texts, an understanding that relates as much to a vision of a possible anthropology as to the existing corpus of anthropological literature. If, for the people depicted in anthropological accounts, the contemporary retelling of myths pertaining to the time of creation appears to serve to reactivate ancestral powers of creativity and transformation, could it be said that such powers persist, albeit in altered and perhaps attenuated form, in the self-consciously second-order accounts of such retellings produced by anthropologists? In other words, irrespective of the professed intentions of anthropological practitioners themselves, could anthropological retellings of cosmogenic myths be regarded as further continuations of a process of transmission bringing the elusive before-time of material flux and metamorphosis invoked by the myths into contact
with the present, in this case with a Western academic and popular readership accustomed to thinking about the world in very different terms? In this respect at least, anthropological accounts could themselves be considered as transformative interventions in the present, a medium through which flying canoes, magical metamorphoses and human–animal ancestors are afforded a presence within the epistemic and discursive space of Western technoscientific modernity.

To consider anthropological accounts in this way would be to further blur any distinction between, on the one hand, the magical–material processes credited with bringing forth both human beings and the material world they inhabit and, on the other hand, the cultural expressions (whether they be oral recitations of myths or academic texts) through which such processes find articulation. Both native and anthropological stories—and indeed all stories—could be understood less as representing a world external to themselves than as participating in and extending the self-making of a world of which such stories are both a product and an integral part. If the modern West’s definitional demarcation of nature from culture has tended to disguise such participations, one of anthropology’s most significant, if often unacknowledged, roles has, perhaps, been to render them once more visible by furnishing an archive of alternative possibilities of being and knowing. The affinity between processes of material creation and the fashioning of humanly intelligible narratives is one that is one that I explore further in my next scenario.

SECOND SCENARIO

Atoms are falling through a void. They fall parallel to one another, without touching—at once perfect order and pure chaos. Then something happens—or rather it’s always happening—no before and after. Atoms deviate from their downward fall by the smallest possible angle. A disturbance disrupts the regularity of the flow, introducing turbulence. Vortices form. Atoms, deflected from their downward path, encounter other atoms. Particles of different sizes and shapes conjoin to form solids, liquids, and vapors—earth, sea, and sky. Out of the earth emerge plants, animals, and human beings. Language, political institutions, and property relations make their appearance. Humans discover the use of tools and the domestication of animals. They found cities and begin to worship gods. Out of successive combinations of atoms a world is formed, a fleeting island of stability, destined in its turn to perish as its constituent particles are pulled back into the downward cascade.

Such is the account of the formation of the universe given by Lucretius, the Roman atomist philosopher and scientist of the first century BCE in his only
surviving work, the long poem *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of the Universe), which draws on and refines the atomist theories of the Greek thinker Epicurus.\(^{11}\) In Lucretius’ account, it is the *clinamen*—his term for the minimal angle of deviation in the path of an atom—that allows material creation to occur by disrupting the absolute regularity of rectilinear free fall:

When the atoms are traveling straight down through empty space by their own weight, at quite indeterminate times and places they swerve ever so slightly from their course, just so much that you can call it a change of direction. If it were not for this swerve, everything would fall downwards like raindrops through the abyss of space. No collision would take place and no impact of atom upon atom would be created. Thus nature would never have created anything. [Lucretius 2005:43]\(^{12}\)

Lucretius does not rule out the existence of gods, but insists that such beings play no active role either in human affairs or in the creation of the universe, which comes about rather as a product of collisions between atoms of different kinds and their resulting combinations (Lucretius 2005:132–134). Lucretius’ poem evokes a spatially and temporally unbounded universe, in which combinations of atoms are continuously forming and dissolving and where transformation is the only constant. Whatever comes to exist is always already in the process of dissolution. He predicts that the present world, which he thinks likely to be only one amongst many created worlds, will, in its turn be pulled asunder and its constituent atoms redistributed (Lucretius 2005:63–64, 137). It is this emphasis on the world-forming capacities of self-organizing material processes, rather than on the actions of a divine creator, that has led a number of later commentators to identify Lucretius as a precursor not only of the theory of evolution (e.g., Bergson 1959) but also of the chaos and complexity theorists of today, with their explorations of nonlinear dynamics and open systems operating far from equilibrium (Prigogine and Stengers 1984:141, 302–305; Serres 2000; Stengers 1997:47–49). Indeed, for Lucretius, to exist at all is to be in a state of disequilibrium.

Lucretian atomism, with its collisions between solid particles, may seem far from the “fluidity” of the Australian and Melanesian mythic world as described by Lévy-Bruhl. Nonetheless, at least one of Lucretius’ latter-day readers, the philosopher Michel Serres, has argued that his description of the universe is best understood with reference to the principles of fluid mechanics (Serres 2000:5).\(^{13}\) In Serres’s reading, Lucretius offers a vision of a fluid universe, defined by continuous and unceasing movement, where stability and coherence—and indeed the world as we
know it—are merely the results of a temporary and localized slowing down of the universal flow: “Everything flows, turbulence appears, temporarily retains a form, then comes undone or spreads. Physics is entirely projected on the current events of hydraulics in general. The physics of Lucretius is a hydraulics” (Serres 2000:82). Serres notes that Lucretius’ account undoes any clear-cut opposition between form and disorder. Both the emergence of order and its inevitable dissolution are understood as instances of a generalized process of transformation, set in motion by the clinamen as the discrepancy or deviation that allows a world to come into being (Serres 2000:27).

Both Serres and Lucretius, in their different ways, offer unequivocally materialist accounts of the universe, accounts in which matter itself is an active principle to be understood not in terms of invariant laws but via the ubiquity of movement and transformation. Such a materialism, in focusing on the emergence and dissolution of apparently stable forms, refuses too any absolute distinction between the products of nature and those of culture. For Lucretius, mind and consciousness, no less than bodies and inanimate objects, are material entities formed by the aggregation and disaggregation of atoms. This claim serves too as the basis for a materialist theory of perception. All objects, Lucretius claims, are emitting constant streams of particles, which travel through space and strike the atoms comprising the human sense organs, producing the effects of sensation. Touch and sight are therefore provoked by the same stimuli. Images, or simulacra, are composed, according to Lucretius, of “a sort of outer skin perpetually peeled off the surface if objects and flying this way and that through the air.” Images of fantastical or hybrid beings are understood as the result of the accidental intermingling of films given off by different kinds of entities: “The image of a Centaur, for instance, is certainly not formed from life, since no living creature of this sort has ever existed. But, as I have just explained, where surface films from a horse and a man accidentally come into contact, they may easily stick together on the spot, because of the delicacy and flimsiness of their texture” (Lucretius 2005:96–97, 113–114). Physical bodies, sensations, and products of the imagination thus share the same origin and the same materiality. Indeed, it is precisely on this basis that images are understood as endowed with their own combinatory and generative power.

Lucretius himself appears to understand the act of literary composition as a direct continuation of the processes governing the formation of the universe. He likens the atoms composing a physical body to the letters composing his own verses. Words and things alike are understood as assemblages of constituent particles (Lucretius 2005:54). Citing the latter claim, Serres writes that: “Language is born
with things and by the same process” (2000:123). Language in this account does not interpose itself between human beings and the world, as Saussurean linguistics, for example, would have it, cutting off forever the possibility of direct or unmediated knowledge. Instead, in so far as the cli
tamen marks the birth both of things and of language, the things comprising the world emerge against an antecedent backdrop of noise and chaos already bearing meaningful signatures. Human language can thus be regarded as only one among a multiplicity of intercommunicating message-bearing systems. As human beings we know the world not simply by being in it but also by virtue of the fact that our verbal accounts (whether literary or scientific), like ourselves, necessarily participate in the material composition of the world.

Lucretius poem begins by invoking the goddess Venus, Roman counterpart to the Greek Aphrodite—“the guiding power of the universe”—an opening that appears to contradict the materialist claims that the poem goes on to advance (Lucretius 2005:10). Serres notes, however, that Venus, unlike other members of the Olympian pantheon, is a divinity immanent to the world, born, according to the eighth-century BCE Greek poet Hesiod, from the turbulent waters of the ocean, into which the severed testicles of her father, Uranus had been flung, following his overthrow and castration at the hands of his son, Cronos (Hesiod 1988:8–9, 65; Clay 2003:18–19; Hornblower and Spawforth 2003:700). The origin story of Venus/Aphrodite parallels Lucretius’ account of the universe in charting the emergence of form (in this case the divine, yet voluptuous, form of the goddess herself) out of liquid indeterminacy via an intermediary state of turbulence. The possibility suggested by Lucretius’ text, according to Serres, is that of a science of Venus, a science that would know the world, not on the basis of contemplative detachment from it, but by virtue of its immersion and participation in the world’s material substance. Lucretius, in other words, shows the world to be knowable and comprehensible precisely by refusing any separation between the world and our knowledge of it (Serres 2000:123). Such a view differs from phenomenologically inspired accounts of the “embodiment” of knowledge (e.g., Csordas 1994; Tilley 1994, 2004) to the extent that it depends, not on experiential or sensory engagement with the world, but on direct consubstantiality with it. Serres writes: “My text, my word, my body, the collective, its agreements and its struggles, the bodies which fall, flow, flame or thunder like me, all this is never anything but a network of primordial elements in communication” (Serres 2000:123).

Both Lucretius and Serres maintain that human knowledge and creativity participate directly in a set of larger, self-organizing material processes engaged in
forming and transforming the physical universe. In my next scenario, I want to inquire more closely into the specific circumstances under which such participation might be rendered visible. Are there particular settings, cultural, historical, geographical, in which the continuity between human imaginings and material processes of world formation is made manifest? If so, what might be characteristics of such settings? Are they perhaps themselves zones of emergence, marked by a distinctive materiality, occupying an interstitial state between liquid and solid, form and formlessness, a materiality that infuses too their associated cultural imaginaries? I turn now to consideration of one such possible setting.

THIRD SCENARIO

An impossible city: palaces and churches rising skyward out of the fetid mud of a lagoon. Canals instead of streets. A city at once substantial and elusive. A city of secrets, of intrigues, both sexual and political. A city of masquerades, where appearances and realities become interchangeable, where faces and identities can be obscured beneath the masks of Carnival.

The city in question is, of course, Venice—a series of islands, set amid a coastal lagoon—an expanse of water, reeds and marshes, framed by a sandbar (the “Lido”) open in three places to the Adriatic Sea. It is an environment shaped over millennia by a continuous interplay between land and sea, as the sediment carried by numerous rivers was redistributed by tides to form the islands and sandbank, or else carried out to sea, a process that continues to the present. It is an environment modified too through centuries of human intervention—the reinforcement of the islands, the laying of wooden foundations and construction of stone and brick buildings, the dredging of channels to form canals and a series of coastal engineering works aimed at diverting the river waters out to sea and away from the growing city. The survival of the lagoon’s ecosystem depends on maintaining a balance between the continued laying down of river-born debris and its erosion and dispersal by the tides—if the former prevails, the lagoon will become dry land, if the latter, it will be reclaimed by the sea (Sciaima 2003:3–4). In recent decades, international media coverage has drawn attention to the precariousness of that balance and to the consequent threat posed to Venice by flooding and marine erosion, as in 1966, when a storm surge flooded parts of the city to a depth of up to two meters (Plant 2002:355–358).18

The islands of the lagoon were first settled by refugees from the Italian mainland, fleeing the Germanic invasions of the fifth century. From these beginnings, Venice developed into an independent republic and an important maritime power,
its navies dominating the Adriatic and the seaways to the East and its ports a conduit for wealth and trade goods from Asia, helping to fuel the take-off of European capitalism. By the 18th century, however, Venice had declined from the status of a military and economic power to that of a tourist attraction, drawing wealthy foreign pleasure seekers to its masked balls, its renowned Carnival season (which, by this point, lasted for up to six months of the year) and its numerous casinos and brothels (Redford 1996). Its independence was finally curtailed by the armies of Napoleon in 1797 and it passed from French into Austrian hands (with a brief and unsuccessful attempt to regain its former independence in 1848) before being joined by plebiscite in 1866 to the recently established Italian nation-state. It serves today as the capital of the Veneto region and part of the Padua-Venice metropolitan area (Laven 2002; Morris 1993:94–97; Norwich 2003; Sciama 2003:49; Zorzi 1983).

Alongside these environmental and political vicissitudes, Venice has been no less a city of the imagination. The Venice of imagination has found expression, variously, in the city’s architectural splendors, soaring above the mud in which its foundations are sunk, in the canvases of such masters as Giorgione, Tintoretto, and Titian, in its famed Carnival and in an ever-growing literature, in which Venice’s fantastical and amphibious character is explored and extolled. Significantly, perhaps, much of this literature has been written by outsiders, two of Venice’s best-known native storytellers—Marco Polo (1254–1324) and Giacomo Casanova (1725–1798)—having, in contrast, gained fame or notoriety principally for recounting their travels and exploits away from home (Steer 1970; Tanner 1992). Venice’s numerous and illustrious literary visitors have included Dante, Petrarch, Goethe, Stendhal, Rousseau, Byron, Shelley, Wordsworth, Browning, Dickens, George Eliot, Hans Christian Andersen, Ruskin, George Sand, Henry James, Rilke, Proust, Hemingway, and Sartre (Morris 1993:299; Tanner 1992:349–368). Their responses to the city have been no less various.

Goethe, visiting Venice in 1786, during its final years of independence, saw the sea for the first time in his life and was captivated by the light and vibrant colors of the lagoon and city, affording a striking contrast to the more familiar landscapes of his native northern Europe (Goethe 1970:74–104). Lord Byron, who arrived in self-imposed exile from England in 1816, while the city was under Austrian rule, was no stranger to aquatic environments, his prowess as a swimmer having earned him the nickname “the English fish.” During his stay, he began writing his masterpiece, Don Juan, as well as Canto IV of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage and Beppo, both of which take Venice as their setting. In between bouts of poetic
composition, the English Fish swam regularly off the Lido and immersed himself too in a series of sexual adventures (“at least two hundred” by his own reckoning), which are described at length in his letters and journals (Cheetham 1988:154–169; MacCarthy 2002:316–373; Tanner 1992:22). In Byron’s Venetian poems the city appears both as a place of sexual license (he applauds Venetian husbands for their lack of jealousy) and as one of magical artifice, a “fairy city” rising from the waters, “As from the stroke of the Enchanter’s wand” (Byron 1980:124, 130). This description, which opens Canto IV of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, goes on to juxtapose images of Venice past and present: its onetime wealth and greatness and its contemporary decline and subjugation to foreign rule. Indeed, Byron appears to conceive of the Venice of the present precisely as a ruin, a onetime triumph of art and artifice that now “Sinks like seaweed into whence she rose,” yet all the more poignant for bearing still the traces of her former greatness (Byron 1980:128; Redford 1996:115–124; Tanner 1992:27–29).

Other writers warned instead of the dangers that Venice might pose to unwary visitors, particularly to literal-minded northern Europeans, ill-equipped to resist the city’s pleasures and intrigues. One such unfortunate is the Prince von O**, the protagonist of Friedrich Schiller’s unfinished novella of 1789, The Ghost Seer. A Protestant German nobleman, the product, we are told, of a “bigoted, servile education,” the Prince arrives in Venice with little knowledge or experience of the world, only to find himself embroiled in a conspiracy involving bogus spirit mediums, secret societies, and senior members of the Roman Catholic Church. A series of letters home from a onetime friend and countryman recounts the Prince’s gradual decline: his increasingly ostentatious lifestyle, his gambling, his mounting debts, the withdrawal of funds by his court, and, finally, to the dismay of his family, his conversion to Roman Catholicism (Schiller 2003:61). Schiller’s story prefigures the more extreme and perhaps better known fate of Gustav Von Aschenbach, the protagonist of Thomas Mann’s novella Death in Venice, first published in 1912. Aschenbach is a writer who has been an advocate of discipline and Apollonian order in art, yet for whom a convalescent visit to Venice precipitates an ultimately fatal encounter, both with a repressed Dionysian sensuality (in the guise of his infatuation with the beautiful Polish boy, Tadzio) and with the Asiatic cholera that has infiltrated the city along its ancient trade routes (Mann 1971). Both Aschenbach and the Prince Von O** fall victim, in their different ways, to their own inability to negotiate Venice’s singular combination of lush sensuality and ontological slipperiness. Both insist from the outset on distinguishing scrupulously between nature and artifice, appearance and reality, the temptations of the flesh and the values of the spirit and
both, in consequence, are led astray, with disastrous results, in a setting where these apparent contraries appear to merge and blend.

A number of critics have argued that Venice occupies a distinctive (and perhaps unique) place in the Western literary and artistic imagination (e.g., Doody 2007; Tanner 1992). Certainly, other watery locations such as the Netherlands and St. Petersburg (another city built on reclaimed marshland) have inspired their own verbal and visual flights (Figes 2003:4–68, 157–162, 490–503; Schama 1987). Neither, however, has exercised a fascination comparable in its breadth and longevity to that of Venice, spanning as it does centuries, continents, and languages. From what then does Venice’s enduring capacity to attract artists and writers (and latterly filmmakers) derive? The literary scholar Margaret Ann Doody proposes that the city itself and many of the works inspired by it need to be understood as celebrations of matter. The vision of matter thus expressed is, however, an “unorthodox and inclusive” one, in which the products of nature and culture alike can be accommodated—mud and seaweed alongside paintings and palazzos. This eclectic affirmation of the material world is understood to derive from the city’s relationship to its watery environment, which has, of necessity, been one of constant adjustment and accommodation rather than the definitive imposition of form. Not unlike the masked participants in Carnival, Venice and its lagoon ecosystem are seen as engaged in an ongoing play with surfaces and appearances through their long history of reciprocal transformation, a history in which the conventional boundaries of nature and culture are repeatedly and joyfully transgressed (Doody 2007:293).

Doody’s suggestion is an intriguing one because it allows us to see the literary and artistic mythologizing of Venice as explicitly linked to the recognition of its amphibious character. Poised not only between East and West but also between land and water, solid ground and liquid formlessness, Venice appears to span the distance between the artifices of high culture and the gross materiality of stinking mud (a point reinforced at intervals by news reports of the city sinking back into the lagoon from which it formerly arose).

A more recent literary treatment of Venice that captures something of this in-between character is the novel The Passion by the English writer Jeanette Winterson, first published in 1987 and set during the years of French occupation. Winterson’s narrator, Villanelle, the web-footed, cross-dressing, sexually ambivalent daughter of a Venetian boatman, portrays her native city as a scene of constant transformation, where people reinvent themselves daily through the donning of fresh disguises and where directions are impossible to give because streets and buildings have a habit of rearranging themselves overnight (Winterson 1987:49–50). Since their city fell
to Napoleon, she writes, Venetians have given themselves over increasingly to the pursuit of pleasure, as though seeking refuge from their diminished historical circumstances. At the same time, however, beneath the public appearance of hedonism, there lurks another Venice, a city within a city, accessible through obscure channels and little-known waterways. This hidden Venice is the abode of feral children and outcasts from the upper word of palaces and luxury, like the elderly woman, a onetime dealer in spices, who now lives in an abandoned nook between two buildings, her hair green with slime, feeding on scraps of rancid meat and vegetable matter deposited by the tide (Winterson 1987:114–115). This city within a city is, equally, a space of interchange between the world above and the world below, between the abiding presence of water and mud and the humanly wrought environment that rises out of them, only to jettison its discarded objects (and people) back into the black depths of the lagoon. Winterson’s portrayal of Venice is powerful not least because it suggests that the seeming artificiality of the city as built environment and space of imagining remains suffused by the obtrusive and recalcitrant materiality of its watery setting. Indeed, it is this very mutual entanglement that appears to provide the impetus for cultural invention. It is therefore fitting that the novel as a whole should be, like so many other works inspired by Venice, a celebration of storytelling, of the power of verbal art and artifice both to reveal and to reshape reality—hence the refrain, reiterated at intervals throughout the narrative: “I’m telling you stories. Trust me” (Winterson 1987:5, 69, 160).  

**STORIES AND COSMOGONIES**

I’m telling you stories. Trust me. So what does all of this imply for the art (and science) of storytelling? We need to recognize, first of all, that human beings are not the only, or even the principal storytellers. The animal–human ancestors evoked in Australian and Melanesian creation myths, the swerving atoms of Lucretius and the mud and water of Venice’s lagoon ecosystem are themselves storytellers, that is, producers of a reality endowed with its own dynamisms, its own historicities and its own signifying potentialities, irrespective of the meanings ascribed to it by human acts of culture making. The various human stories discussed here can be understood as products of, commentaries on and contributions to the “stories” woven by this continuously changing physical reality. As such, these are stories that affirm not only the need to keep telling stories, to respond creatively to the creativity of the world’s ceaseless self-transformations, but also the productivity and consequentiality of the stories that human beings tell. The sociologist of science John Law reminds us that
the accounts we give of the world have, inevitably, the effect of altering the world, even if ever so slightly (Law 2002). Although this is certainly true of all stories—those told by self-identified positivists and postmodernists alike—the extent to which human storytellers themselves understand and practice their vocation in such terms is likely to have important implications both for the kinds of stories they tell and for the kinds of realities those stories help to make.

Each of my three scenarios affirms, in a distinct way, the participation of human acts of imagining and fabulation in the processes shaping and transforming the material universe. They cannot, therefore, be understood as so many culturally mediated representations of the “same” material nature, because to do so would imply precisely the separation of nature and culture that the scenarios themselves variously call into question. As an alternative, I propose to advance an unabashedly ontological claim, albeit a self-consciously contestable one. I propose to consider the stories as expressions in linguistic form of a dynamic power of self-differentiation immanent to the material substance of the universe. The term “expression” is borrowed, via Deleuze, from Spinoza, by whom it is used to articulate the relationship between divine “substance,” the infinity of “attributes” into which it determines itself and the “modes” through which it is actualized (Spinoza 1992). Dispensing with the residual privileging of substance over attribute and mode that he finds implied in Spinoza, Deleuze understands “expression” in terms of a conception of Being that explicitly refuses any appeal to transcendence or ontological hierarchy. Although, for both Deleuze and Spinoza it is possible to distinguish between that which “expresses itself,” that “which expresses” (the form of expression) and that “which is expressed,” these do not proceed from one another on the basis of emanation, that is, via a series of diminutions of originary presence. Instead, according to the logic of expression, their relation is one of mutual immanence and reciprocal participation. It is a relation distinct, therefore, from the substitutive relation between sign and referent implied by the logic of representation. As such, expression does not allow itself to be thought in terms of cultural-linguistic mediation and the dualisms of nature and culture, reality and representation that the latter inevitably implies (Deleuze 1990a:13–22, 27, 169–186; Duffy 2004; Piercey 1996).23

I appeal to the notion of expression here because I wish to resist any too straightforward recourse to biological, physical, or social causation. The creativity I have sought to evoke is not the putting into effect of a program or the instantiation of a pregiven set of possibilities that can be described in terms of a genetic template or a set of biophysical laws and principles, conceivable independently of their
material instantiations. Nor can it be adequately understood through an appeal to culture, history, or social context. It is, rather, a spontaneous generation of differences that is always in excess of any single attempt at either causal or structural explanation. Culture should not be thought of here as a mediating screen interposing itself between our cognitive faculties and an already given external world of nature. Rather, both nature and culture can be seen as products of an open-ended movement of becoming and self-differentiation engendering and traversing diverse terrains, agents, and entities. It is this process itself that I wish to identify as a primary locus of creativity, a creativity prior to the differentiation of culture and nature, subject and object, reality and representation. This should not be understood as the activity of a transcendent creative power, or what Deleuze terms a “One-above-being” (1990a:172). It is, rather, the inexhaustible creativity of Being, understood as the continuous emergence of beings (entities) of multiple kinds, in each of which, according to the tenets of an expressionist ontology, Being itself is understood to be equally and fully present.

It is my contention that human creativity and imagining are enabled and informed by their participation in this more expansively defined creativity and that the products of human imagining in turn both manifest and carry forward this creativity through the elaboration of new verbal, visual, and other worlds. It is here that both the sciences and the social sciences need, as Serres has suggested, to make room for art and literature (incl. mythology), not as the duplicitous and derivative media once disparaged by Plato, nor as a convenient source of sociological or historical data, but as distinct modes of knowing, capable, perhaps uniquely so, of revealing the coemergence of culture, nature and their attendant forms of knowledge in and through the material processes of Being’s generative self-differentiations (Plato 2003; Serres 1997:65).

Alongside calls for the reimagining of the nature–culture binary, a number of recent anthropological writings have sought to reconceptualize the project of anthropology in terms that resonate with my argument here. Michael Jackson, Kirin Narayan, Kathleen Stewart, and Michael Taussig have all produced works that blur accredited distinctions between ethnographic and literary, documentary and fictional modes of writing (Jackson 2007; Narayan 2007; Stewart 2007; Taussig 2004). Vincent Crapanzano has urged anthropologists to pay greater attention to the creativity associated with “imaginative horizons”—elusive moments of transition or transformation that blur the boundaries between presence and absence and thus frustrate cultural understanding’s habitual demand for coherence and continuity (Crapanzano 2004). Michael Fischer, borrowing from the vocabulary of science
studies, has argued for a view of culture and cultural analysis as “experimental systems”—open to the recognition of emergent realities and the posing of as yet unformulated research questions (Fischer 2007). Anna Tsing has reaffirmed the importance of the anthropologist’s role as a storyteller, testifying to the possibility of unexpected alliances and collaborations as an alternative to accounts of globalization as a process with an already established trajectory and outcome (Tsing 2004).

What links these stylistically and theoretically diverse explorations is the attempt to formulate ways of knowing and writing that remain open to the possibility of being surprised by the unforeseen.

Such a commitment seems to me, however, to necessitate a further step. It requires that we move beyond the reappraisal of our procedures of study and modes of writing to reflect on the nature and status of the realities that we hope to engage. It obliges us, in other words to overcome a long-standing preoccupation with questions of epistemology and to venture instead on to the altogether riskier terrain of ontology. The sought-after openness to new and emergent realities depends, I suggest, on a sense of the real itself as protean and perennially unfinished, at once malleable and imbued with its own forces and determinations, which remain, finally, irreducible to the parameters of human knowledge production. It is just such an affirmation of the productive force of the material–real that I have attempted to trace in each of my three scenarios. In juxtaposing them here I have tried to evoke, under different aspects, a vision of the material world (which includes, but is not limited to what we are accustomed to think of as “nature”), not as a passive recipient of the order and meaning imposed on it by culture, but rather as imbued with its own dynamism and its own generative capacities.

Such a conception has been articulated, often in strikingly divergent terms, by a variety of thinkers, past and present. A list of those who have challenged and inspired my own thinking might include (in addition to those already mentioned) Heraclitus, Giordano Bruno, Henri Bergson, Georges Bataille, Elizabeth Grosz, and Karen Barad (Barad 2007; Bataille 1988; Bergson 1975; Bruno 1998; Grosz 2004, 2005; Heraclitus 2001). Such a list would include also the Trobrianders, the Dobuans, the Merind-anim and a host of other peoples described in the anthropological record, who have never subscribed either to the distinction between “nature” and “culture” or to the restriction of agency and creativity to individuated human subjects.

In seeking to cultivate a sense of the real that might nurture an experimental openness to new possibilities of knowing and writing, anthropology, I suggest,
stands to learn much from each of these sources, not least from the populations anthropologists themselves have traditionally studied. To avail of this latter possibility, however, requires that anthropology be willing to engage its informants as fully fledged intellectual interlocutors and potential coproducers and to enter into dialogue with, rather than seeking to explain away, the ontological and metaphysical claims that they put forward. The stories told by anthropology’s traditional informants need, in other words, to be accorded parity of status with the stories told both by anthropologists themselves and by the Euro-American theorists on whom anthropologists habitually rely. Anthropology’s comparative reach might thus yield not only alternative models of human social organization, as David Graeber has recently suggested (Graeber 2004), but also alternative conceptualizations of the physical universe and the various entities comprising it. Rather than the study and documenting of cultural difference, ethnography might be understood as an encounter through which the parameters of the real can be renegotiated and, potentially, expanded—to include, for example, magical metamorphoses and animal–human ancestors alongside automobiles, the Internet, neoliberalism, and stem cell research. This is not a matter of cultural relativism but of engaged creative practice, involving both the empirical exploration and the experimental composition of a reality that is acknowledged to be fluid, heterogeneous, and multiple and that is produced and revealed under different (although no less objectively “real”) aspects by the endeavors of both science and poetry.

If we are to unlearn our parochialism it is not through a faux-magnanimous gesture of multicultural tolerance, which, crucially, leaves untouched a reality assumed to exist “out there” independently of its cultural representations. It is, rather, by relinquishing definitively the distance we have been accustomed to maintain between the world and our knowledge of it—a distance that the notion of representation and the definitional demarcation of “nature” from “culture” have played a decisive role in securing. In relinquishing that distance, we assume responsibility for our creative and world-forming engagements with a multiplicity of human and other-than-human presences—presences that we can aspire neither to control nor to exhaustively know. Not the least of the contemporary challenges facing anthropologists and other storytellers might then be: How to align an experimental understanding of knowledge production and an experimental writing practice with a no less experimental ontology of world making? What kind of anthropology would that be? What kind of world would that be?
ABSTRACT
What does it mean to create? Who or what could be said to create? God? Artists? Evolution? Markets? The Dialectic? Do things “just happen” and if so is that a kind of creativity? Taking storytelling as its point of reference, this essay considers the notion of creativity as it applies both to the productions of the human imagination, especially stories, and to the self-making of the material universe. I define creativity broadly as the bringing forth of new material, linguistic, or conceptual formations or the transformation of existing ones and as calling, not for a “cultural poetics,” but for a more broadly conceived poetics of making (poesis, in its most inclusive sense), encompassing both the natural and cultural realms as conventionally designated, a poetics capable of articulating the stories human beings tell with cosmogonies detailing the coming-to-being of the physical universe. Extending the purview of creativity beyond the human realm to include the processes shaping the material universe allows us to envision creativity itself in terms of a generative multiplicity that resists articulation in binary oppositional terms and that demands therefore to be thought as ontologically prior to any possible differentiation between the domains of nature and culture, or between reality and its cultural—linguistic representations, challenging us to reimagine not only the relationship between nature and culture but also the problematic of representation that continues to inform much work in the humanities and social sciences. Such a reimagining might proceed precisely from an enlarged understanding of creativity—and in particular of storytelling—and I consider some of the epistemic and writerly implications of this claim for anthropology as a discipline concerned preeminently with exploring and documenting the varieties of human being-in-the-world.

Keywords: creativity, nature and culture, anthropological theory, critical theory, comparative studies, literature, philosophy, science studies

NOTES

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1. Gates’s appeal was made in the course of an address to business leaders at the World Economic Forum, held in Davos, Switzerland in January 2008.
2. A somewhat different delimitation of the concept of creativity can be found in the work of the evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller. Seeking to identify the evolutionary origins of human creativity, Miller draws a distinction between “pragmatically accurate” and therefore survival-enhancing cognitive models attributed to the pressures of natural selection and the capacity to weave “amusing and attractive” fantasies, which is understood to have evolved through a parallel process of sexual selection as a means of attracting sexual partners. Creativity
is identified with the latter capacity. Although his project is to situate creativity at the interface between culture and biology, as an alternative both to genetic determinism and to what he takes to be the more narrowly utilitarian biases of certain versions of natural selection theory, Miller tends to understand creativity itself as an adaptively derived and genetically transmitted capability of individual organisms, oriented toward self-display and the attraction of prospective mates, rather than as a feature of organism–environment interactions, about which he has little to say outside the immediate context of mating (Miller 2001:420–425).

3. The origins of the modern bifurcation of nature and society as distinct domains of knowledge have sometimes been traced to the time of the so-called "scientific revolution" in Europe, particularly the 17th century (e.g., Latour 1993; Shapin and Schaffer 1985). Such a periodization renders the emergence of the nature–society divide contemporaneous with the shift traced by Michel Foucault from a 16th-century regime of knowledge founded on a web of resemblances and similitudes linking human beings, the natural world and the various superlunary planetary bodies, to one based on a logic of representation as exemplified by the new disciplines of biology, philology, and political economy. In Foucault’s account, this involves also a transition from a ternary system of signs, comprising sign, signified, and the "conjuncture" between them, to a binary one, comprising only sign and signified. This shift is seen as raising the question of how a sign might to be linked to what it signified, a question that the “Classical” period (beginning in the 17th century) answered in terms of representation, and the “modern” period (from the beginning of the 19th century) via the analysis of meaning and signification (Foucault 1994:42–43). A more far-reaching critique of the notion of representation is to be found in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, who suggests that: “The epoch of representation is as old as the West.” Characteristic of representation, in Nancy’s view, is a preoccupation with the limit—hence the West’s desire to represent both itself and its “outside” (variously coded as “the East,” “the Other World,” etc.) in a gesture aimed precisely at eliminating creativity by forestalling the emergence of whatever is not already given according to the order of representation itself (Nancy 1993:1–2).

4. Ingold’s relational understanding of the “life process” differs significantly from the notion of “autopoieis” developed by the Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela to describe process by which living systems (such as cells) maintain and constitute themselves in a space (Maturana and Varela 1980). In Maturana and Varela’s account, emphasis is placed on self-containment and the clear demarcation between inside and outside, a view that, in the words of one recent commentator, “replicates the historical comportment of life as an entity distinguishable from its environment” (Doyle 2004:269).

5. My formulation here, like the title of this paper, references Isabelle Stengers’s notion of “cosmopolitics”—that is, a politics that would be conducted without reference to the definitional separation of nature and society or to an already assumed common world (Stengers 2005:995).

6. My use of the notion of intuition here echoes Bergson, who employs the term, contra Kant, to invoke the possibility of a direct apprehension of things in themselves, not dependent on rational analysis or a priori categories of thought (Bergson 2007:87–106, 133–169).

7. According to Malinowski, the Trobrianders divide “folklore” or verbal tradition into a number of different categories: libogwo or “old talk,” “which we would call tradition”; kukwanebu, fairy tales, recounted for amusement at different seasons of the year and dealing with avowedly untrue events; wosi, songs; vinavina, ditties chanted at play or under particular circumstances; megwa or yopa, magical spells. Libogwo or “old talk” consists both of historical tales (exploits of past chiefs, shipwreck stories, etc.) and of lili’u—myths—which are held in great reverence and have an active influence on daily life. Historical tales have as their protagonists “humans like ourselves” whereas lili’u are concerned with the actions of mythical personages endowed with magical or supernatural abilities (Malinowski 1922:299–301).

8. Magic, Malinowski notes, is never thought of as having been invented or made, but rather as having always been there: “its very essence is the impossibility of its being manufactured or invented by man, its complete resistance to any change or modification by him. It has existed ever since the beginning of things; it creates, but it is never created; it modifies, but...
must never be modified” (Malinowski 1922:400). Malinowski’s most extensive collection of
Trobiand spells and magical formulae is to be found in the Corpus Inscriptionum that occupies
much of the second volume of his study Coral Gardens and Their Magic, a work in which he also
develops a theory of “magical” uses of language as a universal human capacity acquired during
childhood (Malinowski 1935).
9. The term Loritja (employed by Strehlow) is an Arrernte term used to designate their neighbors
and regarded by the Kukatja themselves as derogatory (Tindale 1974:137, 155).
10. It is possible that Strehlow did not witness any totemic ceremonies at firsthand and that his
account therefore relies on the descriptions of others. Strehlow’s son, Theodor, who was to
become an eminent scholar of Aboriginal languages in his own right, recalls in a memoir that
his father, a Lutheran missionary, was unwilling, despite his ethnographic curiosity, to attend
and thus give tacit approval to non-Christian sacred occasions (Strehlow 1969:66).
11. Little is known of Lucretius’ life, place of birth or social status. His full name (Titus Lucretius
Carus) is given only in manuscripts of his work. Epicurus (b. Samos 341 BCE; d. Athens
270 BCE) was a moral and natural philosopher who taught that the universe was composed
of shifting arrangements of changeless atoms. He taught that the soul, like the body, was
mortal and that pleasure and tranquility of mind were therefore the basis of the good life
12. The elusive temporality of the clinamen—taking place in “a minimum of time” is described by
Deleuze: “The clinamen or serve has nothing to do with an oblique movement which would
come accidentally to modify a vertical fall.” Rather, the clinamen has always been present as “a
differential of matter and, by the same token, a differential of thought” (Deleuze 1990b:269).
13. Serres’s insight is applauded by Deleuze and Guattari, who write that “the atom of the ancients,
from Democritus to Lucretius, was always inseparable from a hydraulics, or generalized theory
of swells and flows. The ancient atom is entirely misunderstood if it is overlooked that its
essence is to course and flow” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:489).
14. For Lucretius, the materiality of mind and body, in their common derivation from the clinamen,
is also the source of human free will: in so far as human beings, their bodies and minds are
(like everything else) formed by chance combinations of atoms, they already contain within
themselves the possibility of acting in unpredictable and nondetermined ways (Lucretius
15. One of the most striking features of Lucretius’ text, at least for an early-21st-century reader,
is the fact that it is written in verse, although a treatise on physics in the form of a poem would
have been less surprising to readers in classical antiquity, for whom the genre of the “didactic
epic” was a more familiar one (Gale 2001).
16. Webb Keane identifies two of the key assumptions underwriting Saussure’s understanding
of the linguistic sign as being “the radical distinction between signs and the world; and the
doctrine of arbitrariness, which held that there are in principle no relations between signs
and the world except those established by the conventions of the system itself, commonly
understood as a code shared among its users” (2007:22). One result, Keane argues, is that
Saussure attaches little consequence to the materiality of linguistic form.
17. Serres can be criticized for relying on a too-straightforward opposition between a “Venusian”
science of fluid dynamics and a “Martial” physics of solids (named after Mars, the Roman god
of war), numbering among its supporters Plato, Descartes, Bacon, and a host of successors
and dedicated to the pursuit of an “objective,” context-free knowledge, extricated from any
a similarly oversimplified contrast between “fluid” and “static” conceptions of the universe
continues to be invoked in many accounts of contemporary science.
18. Subsequent, less severe floods and the prospect of rising sea levels have fueled increasing
concern about the city’s future, prompting a series of ecological studies and the establishment
of a number of international fund-raising organizations concerned with the preservation and
restoration of Venice’s historic buildings, such as the British-based Venice in Peril Fund.
In 2003, work commenced on the construction of a series of mobile underwater barriers,
intended to protect Venice from tidal flooding by closing off the three lagoon inlets at times
of water surge (Fletcher and Spencer 2005).
19. The Venetian republic’s system of government comprised a leader, the Doge, elected for life, along with a series of councils, composed of members of the Venetian aristocracy (Norwich 2003:166, 282–283).

20. Although Venice’s Carnival coincided initially with the familiar, pre-Lenten celebrations of the European Middle Ages, pretexts were found for resuming the festivities after Easter and Venetians were permitted to disguise themselves on days of the year that fell outside the traditional carnival season: for the Feast of the Ascension (la Sensa) in June and from October to December 16. During the period of French and Austrian rule, Carnival was prohibited as a public spectacle, but continued as a private celebration until it was finally suppressed under the Fascist regime of Mussolini during the 1930s. It was subsequently revived in the late 1970s and early 1980s and has continued to be celebrated on an increasingly lavish scale since then (Alei and Favale 2003:32–3, 92–124).

21. Although Venice continues to draw more than 10 million visitors annually, the city’s own population is aging and declining and many of its younger inhabitants are relocating to the mainland, drawn by lower property prices and employment opportunities. Lidia Sciama’s recent ethnography of the north Venetian island of Burano serves as a reminder too that living conditions can vary greatly between the city of Venice itself and the outlying islands of the lagoon, many of which continue to suffer from poor housing and sanitation (Sciama 2003:1–25).

22. In the novel, Villanelle shares narrative duties with Henri, a French cook in the service of Napoleon. Henri, however, proves less well adapted to Venice’s singular conflation of the real and the really made up and ends his days in the lunatic asylum at San Servolo (Winterson 1987:133–160).

23. Deleuze points out that Spinoza himself contrasts the “univocity” of expression with what he takes to be the “equivocal” nature of signs (Deleuze 1990a:330).

24. A number of commentators have argued that Deleuze’s understanding of Being is informed by his concept of the “virtual” as a propensity for self-differentiation and transformation immanent in life and matter and forming a (no less real) counterpart to the actual, which simultaneously embodies and differs from the virtual. The relationship between the virtual and the actual is therefore to be distinguished from that which is often thought to obtain between the possible and the real, whereby the latter resembles the former by realizing a potential that is given in advance (Ansell Pearson 2002; Massumi 2002).

25. Todd Ochoa finds such a vision of generative multiplicity to be powerfully articulated in the notion of Kalunga (“the vast sea of the dead”), invoked in the practices of the Cuban-Kongo society of affliction known as Palo. In Ochoa’s account, Kalunga suggests the possibility of an engagement with materiality prior to any clear differentiation between subject and object, an engagement that is resistant, therefore, to being thought on the basis of representation and cultural-linguistic mediation (Ochoa 2007).

Editor’s Note: Cultural Anthropology has published other essays that retheorize the nature–culture dynamic. See, for example, David Hughes’s “Third Nature: Making Space and Time in the Great Limpopo Conservation Area” (2005); Celia Lowe’s “Making the Monkey: How the Togejan Macaque Went from ‘New Form’ to ‘Endemic Species’ in Indonesians’ Conservation Biology” (2004); and Hugh Raffles’s “‘Local Theory’: Nature and the Making of an Amazonian Place” (1999).

Cultural Anthropology has also published a number of other essays that address ethnographic practice. These include, Nancy Campbell and Susan Shaw’s “Incitements to Discourse: Illicit Drugs, Harm Reduction, and the Production of Ethnographic Subjects” (2008); Brian Axel’s “Anthropology and the New Technologies of Communication” (2006); and Haim Hazan’s “The Ethnographer’s Textual Presence: On Three Forms of Anthropological Authorship” (1995).

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