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TE AO HOU: WHAKAPAPA AS  
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INTRODUCTION  
TRANSFORMING WORLDS:  
KINSHIP AS PRACTICAL ONTOLOGY

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**ABSTRACT:** The papers in this issue trace a particular set of Māori interventions in anthropology, arts, museums and heritage in the early twentieth century and consider their implications for iwi 'tribal communities', development and environmental management today. They follow Apirana Ngata, Te Rangihīroa (Peter Buck) and some of their Māori and Pākehā (European New Zealander) allies at the Polynesian Society through the Dominion Museum expeditions, on Te Poari Whakapapa (the Board of Maori Ethnological Research) and in a variety of community research initiatives. The authors explore how engagement with ancestral tikanga 'practices' and with western technologies and institutions allowed these scholars and leaders to imagine te ao hou 'a new world' in Aotearoa New Zealand. Through the analysis of surviving photographs, films, artefacts, collections and displays, as well as the extensive written archives that were produced through their efforts, the articles in this issue explore how relational concepts and practices including whakapapa 'kin networks' and tuku 'exchange of treasures (taonga)' were mobilised as practical ontologies, that is, as methods for bringing new things (artefacts, systems, concepts) into being. The lasting effects of these collaborative projects on museums, scholarship, government administration and tribal cultural heritage are investigated, showing the enduring relevance of this work in the present.

*Keywords:* Māori, whakapapa (relatedness, kin networks), ontology, indigenous anthropology, tikanga (Māori practices), Apirana Ngata, Te Rangihīroa (Peter Buck)

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I think it rests with you and I to gradually work up our own system of valuation and analysis by culling from our scientific friends the parts of their methods that can be used in the Polynesian field and taking no notice of their set ideas based on other races without testing them first. I have travelled a little way on the road to intellectual emancipation and refuse to accept an

indoor explanation of myself by outsiders no matter how high their status in the ethnological world. [Such a scholar] is a collector with bottles ready labelled and everything must go in one or other of these bottles, the bottles that have been labelled in the university class room and not in the field that the labeller never saw. No! Ma taua ano e wehewehe nga taonga, ma taua e whiriwhiri ki tewhea kete ki tewhea kete. Ma taua ano e raranga he kete hou mo nga taonga kaore e tika kia whaona ki nga kete tawhito. Ko wai o te Pakeha e maia ki te ki mai ki a taua kei te he ta korua patu i te kai nei. [Wiremu Parker's translation: "It is you and I who must separate out the items [*taonga* 'treasures'] and sort them into each basket. It is you and I who must weave a new basket for the items which it would be wrong to place in the [old] basket. Who of the Pakeha [European New Zealanders] would dare to say to us, 'Your destroying of this food is wrong [i.e., you are wrong]?'"]

—Apirana Ngata, letter to Peter Buck (Te Rangihīroa), Wellington, 1 August 1928 (Sorrenson 1986: 122)

What (and who) is anthropology for? The question has preoccupied practitioners since the discipline's late-nineteenth-century inception, but has become pressing in a climate of cost-cutting in universities and an atmosphere of pessimism—about the future of liberal arts education, of politics, even of the environment that sustains all life—uncertainties characteristic of much public and scholarly life today. As arts and humanities subjects are downscaled in favour of those held to offer better employment prospects and more concrete routes to resolving urgent problems, as academic jobs dry up and departments are threatened with closure, the question of what a discipline contributes to learning and to society at large once again demands compelling answers.

While in this Special Issue the focus is held on a particular set of historical relationships and their present and potential significance, the people at the heart of our study had ready answers to the broader question of anthropology's utility and purpose. Apirana Turupa Ngata (1874–1950), Ngāti Porou leader, land reformer, politician and scholar, and Te Rangihīroa (1877–1951) of Ngāti Mutunga (also known as Sir Peter Buck), doctor, military leader, health administrator, politician, anthropologist and later museum director, saw anthropology (or "ethnology", as it was often called in the early twentieth century) as a valuable device, one of "nga rakau a te Pakeha" (the tools of the Pākehā) as Ngata himself famously put it (Higgins and Meredith 2011), in the quest to ensure better lives for their people and a brighter and more hopeful future for all New Zealanders. At the same time, they were very clear that this was a tool best held in Māori hands and wielded with deep insight into Māori ideas and aspirations, although allies could contribute useful skills and expertise to the struggle.<sup>1</sup>

Looking back on their time from a different perspective—one informed by the potent challenges to anthropology levelled by post-colonial theorists and by proponents of research driven by Māori principles and values (*kaupapa Māori*), for example—such optimism is hard to imagine. Harder still when reflecting on those aspects of present-day Māori experience, which Ngata and Buck hoped might be remedied through the judicious application of anthropological methods. Despite their ambitious and wide-ranging programmes, Māori continue to suffer disproportionately from poor health and higher mortality rates, the worst incarceration rates in the OECD (McMeeking 2017) and other ongoing inequities associated with poverty and with private and institutionalised forms of racism (Houkamau *et al.* 2017). How do we reconcile their optimism 100 years ago with this bleak situation in 2019? Were they simply wrong about anthropology’s potential to facilitate positive social and economic transformations, and the uses they made of anthropological ideas and approaches?

This is one strand in the argument brought against Buck and Ngata by scholars in recent decades, many of whom are sharply critical of their work and that of their Young Maori Party colleagues. The group are often painted as members of a privileged class of indigenous elites who used the social and political capital afforded by a Pākēhā education to their own, highly questionable, ends. Within anthropology especially,<sup>2</sup> their legacy has been handed down as one of political and cultural conservatism combined with a form of class- and tribally oriented nepotism that produced, it is said, a cultural assimilationist agenda (Webster 1998: 126), a stultifying “traditionalisation” of Māori creativity (Hanson 1989; Kernot 1998, 2004; Neich 1983; Sissons 1998; Van Meijl 1996; cf. Brown 1999: 242) and the entrenchment of inherited privilege among an undeserving tribal aristocracy (Webster 1998; Van Meijl 1996: 338). Their distinguished positions within imperial regimes of power and knowledge are held up as evidence of a betrayal of the interests of their people, and the institutions they established are criticised, not always implicitly, for fabricating and disseminating a “traditional” vision of Māoritanga/Māoriness judged inauthentic in its supposed backward-looking traditionalism, formalism and lack of innovation.

Based on research conducted during the Te Ao Hou project,<sup>3</sup> however, it seems that such accounts of the group’s work are selective, owing more to present political preoccupations, perhaps, than to the great volume of primary evidence available—in Māori as well as in English—of Ngata, Buck and their tribal associates and Pākehā colleagues’ actual thinking and achievements. This is not to say such interpretations are wrong, or to dismiss individual missteps and failures, or to ignore the biases and prejudices these men brought to the herculean task they had set themselves—no less than to



save the Māori people from extinction. Certainly, many schemes associated with the Young Maori Party's agenda, like Ngata's land reforms or the health practices implemented by medical doctors Buck and Pōmare (which entailed the statutory suppression of *tohunga* 'Māori healers'—at least those they regarded as "quacks") to give but two examples, had devastating consequences for many Māori, not all of which were anticipated.<sup>4</sup> And each undoubtedly, at different times, expressed views that lend credence to the contemporary critique, such as Ngata's glossary on the Treaty of Waitangi, which concluded that Māori signed away sovereignty in 1840 (Ngata [1922] 1963).

Yet, as the articles in this volume show, written by a multidisciplinary team of humanities, arts and social science scholars, these were complex characters working in contested territory within state structures, as well as outside them in their own communities, and sentiments expressed in their private correspondence should not be taken in isolation or at face value. These were people, moreover, with one eye always on the future: their words were written and their actions were carried out not just with a view to posterity but as part of an ever-evolving and constantly recalibrated plan, what they sometimes referred to as the "New Zealand experiment".<sup>5</sup> Instead of framing them one-dimensionally either as cultural saviours or as race traitors, then, these papers explore aspects of their broader intellectual and social milieu to place them more clearly in the international academic circles of which they were active and respected members. At the same time, they shed further light on the grassroots networks of intertribal relationships that shaped their research practice and gave form, substance and direction to their efforts.

In doing so we examine aspects of the practical ontologies that Ngata, Buck and their Māori and Pākehā collaborators developed in their quest to implement a particular vision of the future for Māori people and for the nation of New Zealand as a whole. By practical ontologies we mean the conceptual frameworks, practices, institutions and infrastructures they helped generate to realise new things (artefacts, systems, concepts, ways of being Māori). While engaging with a movement in anthropology and related disciplines toward taking the world-making potential of such constellations seriously, often referred to as the "ontological turn", we seek to reflect on the materials at hand in ways that invite these constellations themselves to illuminate the terms of our inquiry (Henare *et al.* 2007; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). Instead of staying within a fixed set of externally given research parameters (for instance looking at the impact of "colonial education" on "Māori tribal elites" or the relation of "cultural dynamism" to "class politics"), we aim to foreground the research methodologies and terminologies which Te Rangihīroa, Ngata and their associates mobilised and to let these inflect (or infect) our research practice.

As Gad *et al.* (2015) point out, this kind of procedure contrasts with attempts to “go native” or to “see through the eyes” of one’s informants typical of earlier styles of anthropology. Whereas there the aim was to enter into a particular cultural or historical perspective *as such* (like Alfred Cort Haddon’s jokingly expressed desire “to become a Maori”—see Salmond and Lythberg this issue), the ambition of our team of Māori and Pākehā scholars is different. Rather than claiming the ability and right to describe another’s thoughts “from the inside”, the move here instead is both *prospective* and *generative*. Prospective because such an approach turns on remaining open to the unexpected, to things that might emerge from the research that could alter the very terms in which a question is imagined or a problem diagnosed. Generative because such openness demands a certain creativity, of the kind brought by a translator to an “untranslatable” word, phrase or idea, for instance—a kind of openness that allows new things and ideas to become manifest—the agency of ancestors, for instance, or the power of relationships to reshape the future.

The term “practical ontologies” is borrowed from current theoretical discussions in anthropology, but is used here to highlight the systematic and thoroughgoing application of distinctive ways of relating which Ngata, Buck and their allies mobilised as pragmatic as well as intellectual methodologies, and which we emulate in our work on this project today. There are strong resonances between this aspect of their oeuvre and recent writing in indigenous Pacific anthropology, which similarly places genealogical work at the heart of ethnographic practice (Tengan *et al.* 2010). Such work, like that of the earlier scholars discussed here, initiated by and conducted in collaboration with communities, offers hopeful, if guarded, visions for the future of anthropology and other disciplines that foreground ethnographic methods. It looks forward to a regenerated practice in which those whose lives are most at stake in ethnographic accounts and analyses take on leading roles as way-finders toward better ideas and descriptions, ones that relationally rework and refigure those too easily fallen back upon, not least the term “indigenous” itself (Tapsell 2017, 2019).

Like these Oceanic scholars, Ngata in particular saw *whakapapa*—most broadly defined as a framework of relatedness between all things—as warp and weft not just of Māori life but of all his strategic interventions, whether academic, artistic or political. Whakapapa was at once conceptual infrastructure, bodily substance and practical *modus operandi* for effecting meaningful material, psychological and spiritual transformation. In the letter to Buck quoted above, Ngata talks not just about using western categories but creating new *kete* ‘baskets’ into which *taonga* ‘treasures’ could be put, i.e., a Māori framework of analysis. As Wayne Ngata and Amiria Salmond note in their papers, while activating whakapapa in his practical efforts to ensure a

thriving future for his people, Ngata made significant steps toward deploying its key concepts to record and analyse the nation's history as well as Māori ways of living. In part, this enterprise was empowered by his engagement with anthropology, as he presented papers on what he called, after W.H.R. Rivers, the “Genealogical Method” at academic meetings and congresses. Ngata also wrote a substantial portion of what he intended as a doctoral thesis in anthropology, expanding considerably on these ideas. An extract of this remarkable treatise dealing with whakapapa is published here for the first time with an introduction by Wayne Ngata, a member of the extended *whānau* ‘family’ of Apirana Ngata and a leading Māori scholar as well as Raukura/Chief Advisor Te Ao Māori to the New Zealand Ministry of Education.

In their articles in this volume, artist Natalie Robertson, anthropologist Anne Salmond and interdisciplinary scholar Billie Lythberg similarly explore various ways in which whakapapa with its relational strategies shaped an earlier phase of Ngata and Buck's engagement with anthropology. Between 1919 and 1923, the friends supported and took active roles in a series of pioneering ethnographic expeditions into Māori communities organised and carried out with staff at the Dominion Museum (the national institution in Wellington that today is known as Te Papa). Inspired by Cambridge anthropologist Rivers's 1915 visit to New Zealand and his call for the Dominion “to undertake a full ethnographic survey of the indigenous races over which she rules” (Rivers 1926: 261), Ngata as a member of Parliament lobbied for records to be made of Māori traditional practices and music using new technologies like the cinematographic cameras and wax cylinders employed during Rivers's 1898 expedition to the Torres Strait. The Dominion Museum took up this challenge, and four ethnographic field trips were carried out, relying substantially on Ngata's support and networks and including Anne and Amiria Salmond's ancestor James McDonald, Dominion Museum artist and photographer. These articles both focus on the fourth and final expedition to the East Coast (Fig. 1) in 1923, where the team was hosted by Ngata at his home in Waiomatatini.

Robertson's familiarity with the communities and land at Waiomatatini and Port Awanui, where her maternal grandfather, David Hughes, was schooled, along with her membership of the Ngāti Porou kin group who hosted this expedition, has enabled her to trace lines through the close-knit fabric of whakapapa and friendships that determined the team's itinerary and the kinds of knowledge and practices they were encouraged to record. Exploring the active engagement of the *haukāinga* ‘home people’ in front of McDonald's camera and their generous *manaakitanga* ‘hospitality’ towards the team, Robertson draws out relationships and connections, including those forged between Te Rangihīroa—Major Peter Buck in the Great War's Pioneer Battalion—and local families, whose sons had died in battle. Her contribution

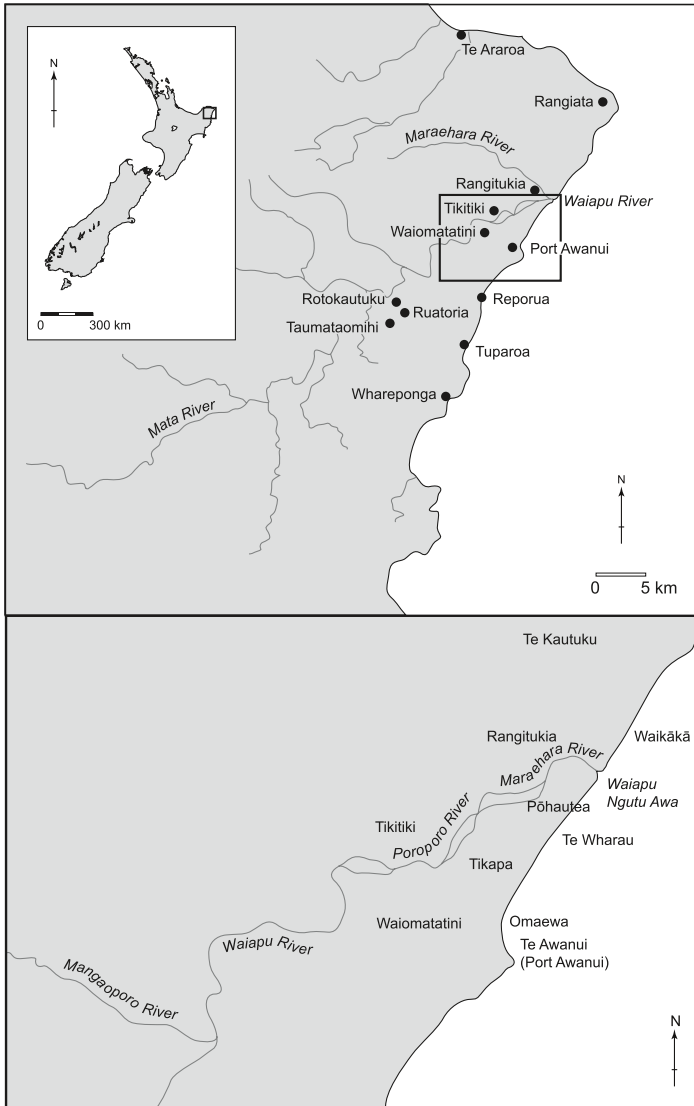


Figure 1. Localities along the North Island's East Coast that are referenced here and in the articles that follow. The lower map details place names and rivers of interest.



emphasises the different qualities of these relationships, genealogical and otherwise, and the ways in which they were acknowledged and maintained during the expedition, weaving around the films, images and archival fragments it produced—the taonga that it helped bring into being—a rich account of the expedition's exchanges with her people, then and in the present.

Salmond and Lythberg show how this expedition in particular marked a turning point in Buck's career, leading him "away from New Zealand and towards the international discipline of anthropology". Armed with lantern slides and films taken a few months earlier on the East Coast, he attended a meeting of the Pan-Pacific Science Congress in Australia, meeting leading anthropologists of the day and being lauded for his contribution as a scholar and as a Māori. Soon afterwards he was invited by the Bishop Museum in Hawai'i to join further ethnographic expeditions, this time to the Cook Islands and further afield. This was to be the beginning of a long and celebrated expatriate career as a professor of Pacific anthropology. For Ngata too, the expedition was a watershed, convincing the statesman that the way forward for Māori lay not only in recording ancestral knowledge from the past but in actively revitalising it in the present. The East Coast field trip lent momentum to the statesman's subsequent extraordinary phase of activity, encompassing the foundation of a national board to direct and fund anthropological research, Māori land consolidation and settlement schemes, agricultural development initiatives, and nationwide initiatives to build elaborately carved meeting houses and to revitalise traditional Māori art forms associated with performance, oratory, crafts and architecture.

Conal McCarthy and Paul Tapsell's contribution picks up this point, detailing the founding of Te Poari Whakapapa—established by statute as the Board of Maori Ethnological Research—soon after the Dominion Museum team returned to Wellington. Like Robertson, they draw attention to the seminal roles played in furthering what had begun as the Young Maori Party's agenda not just by prominent Māori politicians and professionals like Buck, Pōmare and Ngata, but also by members of broader tribal networks that included ordinary Māori people as well as leaders in a wide range of communities and kin groups. Paul Tapsell, a leading Te Arawa anthropologist himself, pays particular attention to Te Arawa ethnologist Taiporutu Mitchell, a leader of his people at Ōhinemutu, who was a lifelong friend of Ngata's and one of his closest research collaborators.

Mitchell was an important knot in the wide net that Ngata cast across the country of knowledgeable men and women who were paid or otherwise compensated by the Board for their contributions to ethnological research. He was instrumental in setting up the School of Maori Arts and Crafts in Rotorua, a nexus of activity for Ngata's nationwide programme of artistic

and cultural revitalisation. Mitchell also routinely hosted the politician when he was in the area, facilitating his dealings with other local kin groups. As Tapsell and museologist McCarthy emphasise, the active support of such people, firmly anchored in their *rohe* ‘tribal territories’, was essential to the Board’s operations as it was to Ngata’s broader initiatives of cultural and economic advancement. It was through these face-to-face relationships as well as widely read and distributed Māori-language newspapers and magazines that a broad base of support for their activities could be cultivated. This article thus complements other recent writing about the Young Maori Party’s activities that detail the roles of one-time members and supporters less celebrated on the national stage than “the three knights” (Buck, Pōmare and Ngata), for instance Pei Te Hurinui Jones (Biggs 1998) and Frederick Bennett, Rēweti Kōhere and Timutimu Tāwhai (Carey 2018; Paterson 2007).

In the final article of this special issue, Amiria Salmond returns the focus to Ngata’s “genealogical” anthropology and considers how he mobilised it in the service of an ambitious programme of Māori artistic, cultural and economic revitalisation and how it serves as a powerful precedent for rethinking and reworking relations through ethnography in theory as well as in practice. Herself the great-great-granddaughter of Dominion Museum photographer James McDonald, who worked closely with Ngata, and an anthropologist like her mother, Anne Salmond, Amiria reflects on the implications of whakapapa in terms of recent discussions about anthropological methods and politics. Whereas critics of some “post-relational” approaches diagnose a lack of both political traction and practical application in efforts to investigate different modes of relatedness, she argues that Ngata’s example points to such experiments’ potential to help challenge and materially transform institutional and popular conceptions as well as the day-to-day living conditions of marginalised peoples.

In sum, the authors of this group of articles are inspired by Ngata’s use of whakapapa as practical ontology, as well as by recent work of Māori and Pacific communities and scholars, who mobilise Māori, ‘Ōiwi, Tongan and Sāmoan ways of relating both as methodological guides and theoretical way-finding devices for refiguring and regenerating anthropology. They seek to engage with these transformative ideas and to apply the lessons of this remarkable Māori-led early-twentieth-century social experiment to the early twenty-first century and its host of challenges. This Special Issue will be followed by a book that will examine the ethnographic expeditions more closely as well as further journal articles exploring the theoretical and historical significance of Ngata and Buck’s project to create “te ao hou”, which transformed worlds in Aotearoa New Zealand 1900–1950 and promises to do so again today.

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## NOTES

1. The anthropological *rākau* ‘tool’ has since been wielded by an impressive array of Māori anthropologists—beginning with Maharaia Winiata, Hirini Mead, Hugh Kāwharu, Bruce Biggs, Patu Hōhepa, Ranginui Walker, Pare Hopa, Pita Sharples, Robert Māhuta, Ngāhuia Te Awekōtuku, Paul Tapsell, Merata Kāwharu, Lily George and Mārama Muru-Lanning, among others. For the most part we have followed current conventions in the spelling of Māori names, as established in *Ngā Tāngata Taumata Rau* published by the Ministry for Culture and Heritage, Wellington (1990–2000). *Te Ara: The Electronic Encyclopedia of New Zealand* (<https://teara.govt.nz/mi?browse=biographies>) has been consulted for biographical details and *iwi* ‘tribal communities’ affiliations. We have therefore used Te Rangihīroa, rather than the earlier variation of his name (Te Rangi Hiroa), which, as he himself explained in a letter to Johannes Andersen, was used in “youthful ignorance” when registering at Otago University and retained for convenience (Buck 1932). However with Apirana Ngata, we have followed the advice of Wayne Ngata (a former chair of Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori / Māori Language Commission) in omitting the macron. In addition, although macrons have been used for Māori words throughout the articles, historical Māori text has been left as it was originally published, such as the quote at the start of this Introduction. Following the recently revised *JPS Style Guide*, Māori words are accompanied by a gloss and italicised only at first usage, as an aid to readers unfamiliar with the Māori language.
2. For overviews of their similar treatment in historical scholarship, see Paterson (2007: 27–28) and Carey (2018: 433); see also McCarthy (2012).
3. Te Ao Hou: Transforming Worlds in New Zealand 1900–1950 is led by Anne Salmond and funded by the Royal Society of New Zealand 2016–2020 (15-UOA-013).
4. On this point, however, see Stephens (2001).
5. See letter from Peter Buck to Apirana Ngata, 1 August 1928 (Buck in Sorrenson 1986: 123).

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