Grant-in-Aid of Research, Artistry and Scholarship

* A Poetics of Emergence: Imagining Creativity Beyond “Nature” and “Culture”
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Abstract:

*A Poetics of Emergence* is a book project exploring the possibility of conceiving of creativity, not as an exclusively human capacity (a view sometimes advanced in Euro-American reflections on the topic), but as a relational process operating across the domains of “nature” and “culture.” Defining creativity broadly as the bringing forth (or “emergence”) of new forms and/or the transformation of existing ones, the book argues that human beings in diverse times and places have intuited such a continuity between human creativity and the processes shaping the natural world and that these intuitions have found a variety of expressions through mythology, folklore, literature, art, philosophy and science. The book aims to challenge more restrictive definitions of creativity and to open a space for transcultural and transdisciplinary dialogue by developing a comparative account of human imagination and creativity as informed by and participating in the self-creation of the material universe.

(149 words)

1. Category Justification

Category #1: untenured faculty in first tenure track appointment, hired 2004, and under review for promotion and tenure during 2008-9 (one year ahead of the University’s stipulated six year period). I have exhausted my startup funds and am seeking support for a major new book project.

2. Present Status of Knowledge:

While the terms “imagined community” (Anderson 1992) and “social imaginary” (Taylor 2004) are now firmly established in the lexicon of the social sciences, recent anthropological literature has begun to inquire more closely into the nature of the role played by imagination and creativity in collective life. Much of this literature has sought to shift discussion of these concepts away from an exclusive focus on the aesthetic realm to consider instead the ways in which imagination and creativity are more broadly implicated in forms of everyday practice (Appadurai 1996; Hallam and Ingold 2007). Some studies, such as Vincent Crapanzano’s *Imaginative Horizons* (2004), have drawn on comparative anthropological data to explore specific aspects of imagination (in this case the notion of the “beyond” or “hinterland”). Other scholars have considered imagination’s role in the shaping of anthropological knowledge, whether in the writing of ethnographic accounts (Atkinson 1990) or as a basis for creative engagement with other cultural worlds (Hastrup 1995). A number of recent studies have attempted to explore the creative and imaginative dimensions of anthropological knowledge by cultivating forms of writing that blur accredited distinctions between academic and literary modes (Jackson 2007; Stewart 2007).
A growing body of cross-disciplinary literature has criticized the modern, Western distinction between “nature” and ‘culture”, which has played a major role in shaping not only the current division of academic disciplines, but also many of the assumptions underwriting such diverse fields as colonial policy, forestry, agricultural science, urban planning and overseas development. Numerous anthropological studies have shown that such a dichotomy is not recognized in many non-Western contexts (Descola 1992; Howell 1996; Strathern 1980). Sociologists of science have demonstrated that even in the case of 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 interconnectedness between the two spheres (Callon and Law 1995; Latour 1993). At the same time, the intellectual underpinnings of the nature-culture distinction have been challenged by a number of philosophers and social theorists, including Gilles Deleuze (1994), Donna Harraway (2004), Michel Serres (1995) and Isabel Stengers (1985). Many of these thinkers have called for the development of new analytic vocabularies capable of re-articulating the relationship between nature and culture in non-oppositional terms. Manuel De Landa, for example, has argued that such diverse fields as economic history, geology and biology can be described in terms of analogous form-engendering and form-dissolving processes (De Landa 1997).

Among contemporary anthropologists, however, it is perhaps the British anthropologist Tim Ingold whose work has sought most explicitly to link the discussion of creativity to contemporary calls for the rethinking of the nature/culture opposition. Arguing that imagination is always a relational activity carried forward in the world, Ingold has claimed that creativity is best understood not as a faculty exercised by individual human beings, but rather as immanent in the “life process” itself, understood as the entire field of relations between humans and their environments (Ingold 2000).

*A Poetics of Emergence* is a response both to the provocations of Ingold, De Landa and others and to the wider ranging debates outlined above. The book is conceived as a work of comparative literary and philosophical anthropology. Its aim is not to provide a historical overview, nor to trace understandings of the concept of creativity across successive contexts. Instead it seeks, by engaging a range of interlocutors, past and present, Western and non-Western, firstly, to reflect upon imagination and creativity as fundamental and enduring aspects of human being-in-the-world, secondly, to propose an expanded view of creativity as traversing the terms of any preconceived distinction between the realms of “nature” and “culture” and, finally, to explore some of the ethical, philosophical and political implications of such a view.

### 3. Plan of Work:
My research will result in a book-length monograph (in which the University of Chicago Press has already expressed an interest). The book will be organized into three broad thematic sections. The first of these explores imaginings of a time outside of or antecedent to human, historical time. Such a time corresponds to what accounts of native Australian traditions have sometimes referred to as a “dreamtime” – a time when the contours of the physical universe are not yet fixed and when humans, animals, plants and features of physical geography are capable of engaging in a constant interchange of forms. The section explores depictions of such a time-before-time in Australian, Melanesian and classical Greek and Roman sources, as well as in the
writings of such modern European thinkers as J. J. Bachofen, Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Julia Kristeva and Michel Serres.

A second section of the book concerns the motif of metamorphosis – that is, the transformation of bodies by magical or other means, from one form it another. I draw here on anthropological accounts from native North America, Malaysia and southern Africa, along with European folklore, literary sources and historical studies of witchcraft, magic and demonology in medieval and early modern Europe. My concern is both with the ways in which accounts of metamorphosis can be understood to evoke a sense of the material world as potentially malleable (and therefore susceptible to change) and with the relationship between the figure of metamorphosis and the acts of cultural creation, including storytelling, through which it is referenced. Can stories about human-animal metamorphosis, for example, be understood as participating in and carrying forward the physical transformations that they describe?

A third section explores the imagination of “marginal” landscapes that appear ambiguously situated between “nature” and “culture.” I draw here on my own ethnographic and archival research on Irish peat bogs, along with comparative material from Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. My discussion draws on a range of sources including ethnography, literature, folklore, visual arts and accounts by archaeologists, geographers and historians. In doing so it seeks to develop an understanding, firstly, of such landscapes as marking at once a boundary and a point of contact and passage between the spheres of “culture” and “nature” as conventionally understood and, secondly, of the works of imagination inspired by them as distinctively shaped by and revealing of this.

Each of the book’s three sections explores, under a particular aspect, the variety of ways in which human beings in diverse times and places have understood and articulated the relationship between their own acts of imagining and cultural creation and the material processes shaping their bodies, their physical environments and their world. The book as a whole thus proposes a vision of human creativity as embedded within, responding to and sustained by a more encompassing creativity immanent to the material substance of the universe – a universe that human beings have always shared with a multiplicity of other presences and agencies. In doing so, it asks too what kinds of ethical and political solidarities, what new understandings of human beings’ place in the world and what possibilities for intervening in and changing the world might be made available by such a vision.

Some of the groundwork for my current project was laid in my first book The Event and its Terrors: Ireland, Famine, Modernity (Stanford University Press, 2004). In that book I considered folklore accounts, oral histories and other non-canonical historical sources as foregrounding the multiple ways in which the past is materialized in the present through landscapes, places and objects, which themselves then assume an agentive role in shaping cultural outcomes and perceptions. My current work thus builds upon a longer-standing concern with the ways in which the material world can be seen to participate in formations of historical identity and cultural memory, while at the same time significantly extending that concern to address debates in anthropology and other fields concerning imagination, creativity and the contemporary salience of the categories “nature” and “culture.”
The project in its current form took shape while I was on research leave in Ireland during the academic year 2006-7 (supported by a McKnight Land Grant Professorship). During this time I carried out library research, consulted the archival collections of the Irish Folklore Commission (housed at University College Dublin) and visited museums, galleries and heritage sites in Ireland, Denmark and the United Kingdom.

I have since completed work on a substantial portion of the book’s first and third sections. Some of this has already appeared in print in the form of articles in the journals *Trames* (Fall 2008) and *Cultural Anthropology* (forthcoming, 2009) and in the form of an edited volume *Engaging Imagination: Anthropological Perspectives on Creativity* (a special issue of the *Irish Journal of Anthropology*, co-edited with Steve Coleman of the National University of Ireland, December 2007). The volume brings together contributors from the United States and Europe to reflect on the role of imagination in social and cultural life and in the shaping of academic knowledge. My own contributions comprise an Introduction (“Why Imagination?”), giving an overview of the concept of imagination and its uses in anthropology and other social science disciplines and an individual article (“To Dream Profoundly: Irish Boglands and the Imagination of Matter”) based on a collaborative environmental art project organized by the Sculptors’ Society of Ireland.

During the summer of 2008 I carried out further writing and library and archival research in Ireland and completed a draft portion of an introductory chapter (presented as a paper at the meetings of the European Association of Social Anthropologists in Ljubljana, Slovenia in on August 29). I plan to submit this as an article to the EASA’s journal *Social Anthropology* during the academic year 2008-9. Between January 1 2009 and June 30 2010 I hope to complete research and writing and to submit a book prospectus for consideration by publishers (University of Chicago Press).

The bulk of the primary research that remains to be done pertains to the second and third sections of the book. In relation to the book’s second section, I plan to consult the sound archives of the School of Scottish Studies (University of Edinburgh), which houses one of the most extensive collections of folktales relating to the theme of human-animal metamorphosis, collected principally in the Scottish highlands and islands. The bulk of the collection (totaling more than 9000 recordings) is not available either online or in published form and much of its contents can be searched only in the form of card and slip indexes. It therefore needs to be consulted on site, although individual recordings, once identified, can be copied for a fee. I therefore propose to spend a period of up to four weeks in Edinburgh reviewing these materials. In connection with the book’s final section, I plan to conduct further ethnographic and archival research on the Lough Boora Parklands project, an open-air sculpture park situated near Tullamore in County Offaly, Ireland, established on a site formerly used for commercial peat extraction and where featured artworks have sought to engage both the industrial history of the site and its ecology and significance as a natural habitat. During the summer of 2008 I was able to pay a number of visits to Lough Boora and to interview the project’s artistic director, Kevin O’Dwyer, himself a practicing sculptor whose work is featured at the site. I now plan to conduct follow-up interviews with participating artists and with members of the local community who have been involved in the project as volunteers. I plan also to conduct archival research in the National Library of Ireland, Dublin, relating to the prior history of the site and its past usages. I envisage that this will involve a period of up to six weeks in Ireland (based primarily in Dublin but involving regular visits to Offaly), to be divided between Summer 2009 and Christmas-New Year 2009-10.
4. Budget Justification

I am requesting Grant-in-Aid funds to support foreign travel, several periods of overseas residence (including accommodation and living costs), reproduction of library materials, including sound recordings, and rail and air travel between research sites in Ireland and Scotland. I plan to undertake this research during the Summer of 2009 and Winter break 2009-10. I envisage that this will occupy a total of approximately ten weeks, divided between the various research sites. Travel and overseas residence are essential to the completion of my research because of the need to carry out ethnographic interviews and first hand observation of visual materials and because the majority of the archival sources I plan to consult are not available in published or online form.

The following is a breakdown of my budget. Currency conversions are based on rates quoted by Universal Currency Converter (www.xe.com/ucc). Airfares are based on figures from Northwest Airlines (www.nwa.com) and Aer Lingus (www.aerlingus.com). Costs for rail travel are based on figures from Irish Rail (www.irishrail.ie). Per diem costs for Ireland and Scotland based on figures quoted by Travellerspoint (www.travelerspoint.com), Dublin Accommodation Finder (www.daft.ie) and on my own prior experience of living and carrying out research in Ireland. Maximum per diem figures are quoted from US Department of State (http://aoprals.state.gov/web920/per_diem.asp).

Roundtrip airfare, Minneapolis-Dublin (Summer 2009 and Winter Break 2009-10)
$3014 ($1507.00 x 2)

Round trip airfare, Dublin-Edinburgh (Summer, 2009)
$107.49 (€75.98)

Roundtrip rail fare, Dublin-Tullamore
$293.68 (€207.60) = €17.30 x 12 (2 weekly trips over 6 week period)

Copying Costs (reproduction of archival documents and sound recordings)
$300

Edinburgh accommodation
$5600 (28 x $200, maximum allowed $277)

Edinburgh meals and incidental expenses:
$2100 (28 x $75, maximum allowed $132)

Edinburgh total:
$7700
Dublin accommodation
$8400 (42 x $200, maximum allowed $308)

Dublin meals and incidental expenses:
$4200 (42 x $100, maximum allowed $191)

Dublin total:
$12600

Total requested
$24 015.17

5. Need Justification

My current project represents a significant departure from my previous research, both methodologically and in terms of subject matter and has therefore required me to spend a considerable time reviewing scholarly literature across a number of disciplines and identifying potential sources. My start-up funds ($5000) were spent on conference travel and the purchase of books and equipment. Faculty and McKnight Summer Research Grants (2005 and 2008) and a McKnight Land Grant Professorship (2005-7) supported exploratory research and allowed me to spend the academic year 2007-8 in Ireland and to undertake an extended period of research and writing in connection with the book’s first and final sections. Given the comparative scope of the project, however, there remains considerable archival and other research to be carried out in other locations. The fact that my project is both interdisciplinary and comparative (i.e. not regionally based) has limited my eligibility for external research funding. A Grant in Aid will cover the remaining costs of overseas travel and residence and thus allow me to complete research for my book. It will thus place me in strong position to apply for external support for the final stages of writing (including residential fellowships) during the academic year 2009-10.

References:

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Haraway, Donna

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