

**Michael W. Scott**

## Getting more real with wonder: an afterword

**Article (Published version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Scott, Michael W. (2017) *Getting more real with wonder: an afterword*. [Journal of Religious and Political Practice](#), 3 (3). pp. 212-229. ISSN 2056-6093

DOI: [10.1080/20566093.2017.1351174](https://doi.org/10.1080/20566093.2017.1351174)

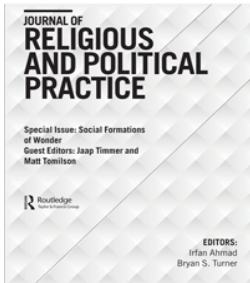
Reuse of this item is permitted through licensing under the Creative Commons:

© 2017 The Author  
CC BY 4.0

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/83340/>

Available in LSE Research Online: August 2017

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.



# Journal of Religious and Political Practice

ISSN: 2056-6093 (Print) 2056-6107 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfrp20>

## Getting more real with wonder: an afterword

Michael W. Scott

To cite this article: Michael W. Scott (2017) Getting more real with wonder: an afterword, Journal of Religious and Political Practice, 3:3, 212-229, DOI: [10.1080/20566093.2017.1351174](https://doi.org/10.1080/20566093.2017.1351174)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/20566093.2017.1351174>



© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 11 Aug 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 91



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Getting more real with wonder: an afterword

Michael W. Scott 

Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics & Political Science, London, United Kingdom

### ABSTRACT

This Afterword is part apologia for an ontology-centred approach to the anthropology of wonder, part diplomatic mission to bring the articles in this special issue into dialogue to yield new insights about wonder. The latter endeavor identifies five key areas in which the articles enhance understanding about wonder. First, they help to clarify the relationship between wonder and socio-political change. Second, they present ethnographic examples of what makes wonder practices work. Elsewhere, I have suggested that wonder can be a *practice* through which people resist existing ontological premises and advance lived alternatives. Going beyond this observation, these articles disclose how wonder practices persist and become routinized. Third, these articles not only show how wonder confers authority, they also show that the authority wonder confers is ontological authority – authority to lay down or revise ontological premises and their ethical and political implications. Fourth, the articles attest that wonder engages our received imagery and discourses about origins and stimulates us to generate new versions that revise, replace, or compete with the old. A fifth issue raised is whether nonhumans can wonder. Pushing against anthropocentric tendencies in some of the contributions, I suggest how we might imagine a nonhuman affective cognate to wonder.

### KEYWORDS

Wonder; ontology; practice; authority; origins

## Between an essentialist and a relationist; or, calling in my crocodiles and letting go of my fish

In *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, philosopher Graham Harman contrasts the relationist ontology of Latour's network theory with the essentialist ontology of traditional realism. 'Unlike for traditional realism,' Harman (2009, 80) writes, for Latour, 'things are not real by being less connected with others, but become more real the more they are linked with allies.'

**CONTACT** Michael W. Scott  [m.w.scott@lse.ac.uk](mailto:m.w.scott@lse.ac.uk)

© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Harman's contrast highlights a strange reality: different ontological premises entail different ways – and degrees – of being real. Essentialist ontologies treat things as absolutes with true and proper natures. This means that relations with others obscure, distort, or diminish things. In order for their true natures and powers to show forth, things must be liberated from relations: isolated in vacuum chambers, made holy by ablutions, reduced to naked potency through detachment. Hence, being less connected makes things more real, truer to what they are in themselves. Cast in these terms, my analyses of wonder discourses among the Arosi of Solomon Islands show how some Arosi are trying to make their island, Makira, more real via – as Eve Vincent puts it in her contribution to this special issue – 'a drive to purify and upraise autochthony'.

Conversely, relationist ontologies treat things as nothing apart from relations. At every scale, the reality of things depends on maintaining the nexuses of relations that inhere in them and in which they inhere. Hence, being more connected makes things more real, more sustained *as* and *in* multiple intersecting networks. Cast in these terms, this special issue makes my efforts to develop an anthropology of wonder more real, more situated in more relations with the work of other scholars.

As the recipient of this gift of having my work on wonder made more real, I experience an awkward betweenness. Whereas some of the contributions to this special issue are more affirming, others are more challenging of my agenda to stimulate interest in the ethnographic study of wonder as an aspect of the anthropology of ontology (Scott 2013, 2014, 2016). On the one hand, I could respond to these responses as a relationist, recognizing that, when it comes to being made more real, critics are still allies in the Latourian sense; they proliferate translations of my approach as much as commenders. And I could deny that there is such a thing as a mistranslation. I could, in other words, take the stance that the anthropology of wonder has no core essence but is whatever it becomes. Furthermore, I could acknowledge that my attempts to clarify my positions are purifications that add to rather than subtract from the proliferation of translations, cannibalistically internalizing the critical interventions of others in reassertions of my own approach (see Latour 1993; Viveiros de Castro 2014). On the other hand, I could respond as an essentialist, insisting that there are either accurate or distorting representations of what I have said. I could, in other words, take the stance that the anthropology of wonder as I have formulated it has a unique integrity that can be obscured by misconstruals and misapplications.

My aspiration, in this Afterword, is to have it both ways, to shift between these two ontologies, hoping to keep both possibilities open. Sometimes I shall write as though the ontological approach to wonder I advocate were nothing but a nexus of relations, the reality of which depends on my ability to let it generate and be regenerated by other approaches. Sometimes I shall write as though my approach constitutes an essence, the reality of which depends on my ability to defend it and eclipse other approaches. Inevitably, I shall be in contradiction with myself. The point is to show that, although it may be impossible to inhabit the

premises of more than one configuration of ontology *at the same moment*, it is not difficult to jump between them situationally – something we, as well as our research interlocutors, are adept at doing, often unawares. To help me tack back and forth between essentialism and relationism, I shall draw on two marvellous origin stories from Melanesia reported in this collection.

In his article, Ben Hall presents a matrilineage origin story from the island of Santa Isabel in Solomon Islands that indexes essentialist premises similar to those I have encountered on Makira. The story tells that a woman once gave birth to a crocodile. Her husband wanted to destroy it, but the woman nurtured the crocodile until strife between it and its brothers forced her to remove it to the sea. Afterwards, however, the men in her matrilineage preserved the secret of how to ward off and summon crocodiles; this knowledge conferred control over the matrilineage's essential nature and power. During Hall's fieldwork, some matrilineages were claiming rights to logging revenue in ways that excluded close nonlineal kin from previously recognized interests in the lands of their fathers' matrilineages. In this context, Hall learned that two sons of a crocodile-lineage man had stolen their father's power over crocodiles. This theft warned their father's matrilineage not to detach itself from them in bids to contain the flow of land-based benefits. If the matrilineage barred these sons' sons from its resources, that would be tantamount to calling in its crocodiles to attack them. But, by stealing command over crocodiles, these men gained power not only to defend themselves but also to divulge the secret. If everyone could call crocodiles, everyone would be one great crocodile matrilineage; crocodiles would come and devour all difference. Faced with this ontological blackmail, the matrilineage must accept a limited dissipation of its power. Inspired by this story, I refer to my essentialist responses as 'calling in my crocodiles'.

In her article, Deborah Van Heekeren presents a species origin story from the Vula'a of Papua New Guinea that may, I speculate, display the relationist premises often ascribed to people in PNG. The story tells how a woman gave birth to mullet fish. Her husband then stole the song she sang to summon her fish-children and used it to catch them for food. The woman had to surrender control over what she had generated, but through her husband's interventions, it came back to nurture them both, and others. Inspired by this story, I refer to my relationist responses as letting go of my fish.

I begin with a brief account of how I became interested in wonder. Because origins, according to essentialist premises, reveal essences, this story reveals the 'real' nature of my approach to wonder. Following this exercise in crocodile calling, I discuss five issues arising from these articles that appear to me most salient for making the anthropology of wonder more real. First, I address the question: does anthropological analysis need to ground wonder in something other than ontology, such as history, politics, or economics? Next, I consider how people keep wonder practices alive, which leads, in turn, to scrutiny of the relationship between wonder and authority. I then identify an insight that emerges from across

several of the articles, namely, that wonder engages our imagery and discourses about origins. Lastly, I wonder: can nonhumans wonder?

### An origin story

Like my approach to anthropology in general, my approach to the anthropology of wonder is ontology-oriented. I became interested in wonder because I am interested in processes of ontological transformation, and it was my attention to these processes among my fieldwork consultants in Solomon Islands that brought wonder to my attention.

Much of my research has been devoted to the study of everyday practices and the ontological premises they imply among the Arosi, a population of around 9,400 Melanesians from the island of Makira (Scott 2007). Arosi practices, I have argued, warrant theorization of an indigenous ontology for which I coined the term poly-ontology. Put briefly, Arosi poly-ontology composes Makira as a plurality of heterogeneously autochthonous matrilineal categories, characterized by continuity of being with their land but discontinuity of being with each other. It composes Makira as an island of islands, as it were, each with its own unique matrilineally conferred autochthonous power, ancestors, and traditions. To compare it with other theoretical models based on lived ontologies, Arosi poly-ontology is a non-Cartesian matrilineal essentialism that differs both from Cartesian dualism and from the relationism implied by the influential models of Melanesian personhood and sociality developed by Roy Wagner (e.g., 1991) and Marilyn Strathern (e.g., 1988). If anything, it resembles totemism, as re-theorized by Philippe Descola (2013).

Integral to my theorization of Arosi poly-ontology has been analysis of the ontological implications intrinsic to historical, religious, and political changes and how these have or may impinge on and transform this mode of being (e.g., Scott 2012, 2016). In particular, I have analyzed the ontological significance of processes that promote the essentialization of Makira as a whole; for Arosi, such processes imply a single insular category of being that is inevitably in tension with the radical plurality of their matrilineal categories. My work has shown how, since the mid nineteenth century, the acceptance of Christianity, depopulation, colonial practices of naming, mapping, and governing, and semiotic processes of ethno-genesis, recently intensified by civil conflict in the post-colonial nation-state, have all contributed to the production of the possibility of Makiran identity as identity of being. If realized, such an identity would subordinate matrilineal difference to an encompassing insular unity and push the boundaries of radical alterity offshore.

It is this situation of potential for ontological transformation – from matrilineal to insular essentialism within a still poly-ontological framework – that has made me an anthropologist of wonder.

Since my second major field study – divided between 2003 and 2006 – I have focused on what I now call wonder discourses about Makira (Scott 2014, 2016). These discourses present icons and indices of pan-Makiran being and power as wonders by ascribing unique and more-than-human insight, influence, and hidden force to the people and things of Makira. Here, it is crucial to note that I identify these discourses as wonder discourses because they articulate Arosi wonder, not because they assert things I find fabulous. It is Arosi themselves who puzzle over the things they scrutinize as possible signs of an unnerving pan-Makiran power, describing them as *ha'abu'oahu* – 'something amazing', 'a miracle', 'a wonder' – or even using the English word 'wonder'.

The most comprehensive of these wonder discourses are those that assemble the figure of the Makiran underground: a vast subterranean urban-military complex said to be run by dwarf-like autochthons called *kakamora* and their human allies. Together, it is said, these agents of the underground preserve the original true language and ways of Makira, which have become corrupted above ground through inter-marriages with outsiders and the impact of colonialism. Eventually, however, the underground will reveal itself. When this happens, its agents will release abundant stores of wealth and natural resources, establish an independent Makiran state, and restore the original true Makiran language and ways of the *kakamora*, disciplining or expelling anyone from elsewhere who is disobedient. The underground, in essence, is an image of Makira in essence, radiating its full reality.

The wonder in such Arosi wonder discourses may be understood, I have suggested, as follows. Any anomalous event or image that comes to hint at pan-Makiran being and power challenges the pluralist premises of Arosi ontology in ways Arosi find at once promising and perturbing. The possibility of the underground, in particular, amazes them because such an entity would rupture all their matrilineal-cum-ontological categories; it would revolutionize their received socio-cosmic order. Their amazement is accordingly double-edged. There is a positive edge: they are elated to think that the island might constitute a single prodigious power in which they all participate. This motivates them to engage in wonder discourses as a *wonder practice*, a technique for heightening wonder as a mode of challenge to ontological premises they wish to resist. Wonder discourses enable Arosi to contradict the onto-political positioning of Makira as weak and marginal within the nation-state. The underground intimates the opposite; it offers the possibility that, in unsuspected ways, Makira may be spectacularly powerful. But there is also a negative edge: even as Arosi are thrilled by the prospect of identity with this new insular entity, they are troubled by the implication that their matrilineal scales of being and power – including their claims to unique territories – may get swallowed up in this encompassing scale (a fate analogous, I suggest, to the one that would befall the crocodile matrilineage Hall discusses, if everyone on Santa Isabel could summon silureans).

This encounter with Arosi wonder has sharpened my awareness of references to wonder elsewhere and spurred me to develop a comparative ethnography of wonder. This began when I noticed how some contributors to the anthropology of ontology invoke wonder. They seem to imply, I observed, that when anthropologists experience wonder in their research, this is proof that they have met with alterity. And I noted how these anthropologists of ontology seem to enjoin openness to such wonder-inducing alterity as a means of promoting ontological shift – as a way of allowing the relationism of non-western others to unsettle the Cartesian assumptions of modernity (Scott 2013, 2014).

Encouraged by the formal similarities between Arosi and anthropological wonder, I have formulated several general statements and preliminary theses about wonder. Drawing on the insights of various philosophers, I have recommended working with a commodious notion of wonder, letting the term comprehend awe, marvel, astonishment, shock, dread, amazement, and horror. Two of the authors represented here cite my first pass at a basic claim about the relationship between wonder and ontology: ‘wherever there is a strong or intensified mood of wonder,’ I proposed, ‘this may be a clue that received ontological assumptions are in crisis and undergoing processes of transformation’ (Scott 2014, 44). In a subsequent publication (Scott 2016), I have elaborated this idea. I have argued that wonder can be both an index that ontological premises are being challenged and a practical mode of promoting such challenges. And I have emphasized that different ontological premises entail different criteria for what constitutes a wonder.

Am I, by telling this origin story, insisting that the anthropology of wonder must be ontology-oriented? Yes and No. In the commentary that follows, I maintain that wonder is intrinsically linked to ontological premises. But I accept that the crocodile of ontology may chase potential collaborators away from the study of wonder; better, then, to treat an ontology-oriented approach more like a fish that others may take or leave.

### **Does wonder need to be grounded in something other than ontology?**

Eve Vincent, writing of an Aboriginal group in South Australia she calls ‘Aunty Joan Mob’, emphasizes that ‘settler colonial history, national political developments and the liberal promise of the recognition of Indigenous cultural difference, bitter local intra-Aboriginal conflicts and the subordination of Aboriginal people within rural Australia’s racial schema are all crucial to understanding why Aunty Joan Mob engage in “wonder discourse.”’ The fear and wonder Aunty Joan Mob experiences ‘out bush’ is best analyzed, she concludes, by attending to these factors ‘rather than turning to rarified accounts of Indigenous ways of being’. I take Ben Hall’s position to be similar. Hall contends that ‘wonder is a sentiment that arises from the shock of the new but that shock needs to be grounded in the broader political and historical processes that are at play’.

But what is it about an ontology-oriented approach that is ‘rarified’ and unable adequately to ‘ground’ the study of wonder? Clues to the nature of the problem lie in Vincent’s appeal to the claim that a turn to ontology involves ‘a privileging of the order of concepts over the order of practice’ (Costa and Fausto 2010, 95) and in her adoption of an inverse order of precedence, giving centrality to everyday practices. For both Vincent and Hall, I suggest, ontology connotes ‘the order of concepts’, treated as epiphenomenal to and less real than ‘the order of practice’. The anthropology of wonder needs to get more real, they seem to be saying.

Resistance to an ontology-oriented approach is grounded, in other words, in the ontological premises of Cartesian dualism – in the problem of the idealism-materialism antinomy and its analogues: structure and event, myth and history, theory and practice, culture and nature. Which is the ontological ground of which? My first impulse, accordingly, is to call in my crocodiles to chase this interminable conundrum away.

I wish that I could persuade all anthropologists interested in wonder to go post-Cartesian – methodologically, at least. Such a post-Cartesian move begins with the assumption that to be is to signify, and that to signify is to be; it posits signifying-thing(s) as the fundamental entity-relation(s). Note that this requires theorizing as myth making (see Willerslev 2011). It involves an imaginative regression to primordiality – past the pre-human back to the pre-sentient – in order to re-set a root premise. The result is a radical reduction of the cogito, applied to one or many (or an infinite regress of) First Signifying-Things, all signifying the great ‘I am’. This methodological myth-theory treats signification and being as *nothing* without each other. Only if we begin with this ontological premise at the level of method can we take the further step of treating people’s ontological premises and the ontological implications intrinsic to all things as always already *pre-grounded* in one another and always literally *influencing* each other. Furthermore, once we arrive at this picture of constant communication and potential for transformation between ontological premises and practices (recognition of the onto-practical link between them; see Scott 2007), it becomes clear why any anthropology, not just the anthropology of wonder, would do well to give equal attention to ontological premises and the classic factors of socio-political analysis.

As should be clear from my origin story, I concur with Vincent and Hall that the anthropology of wonder needs to take socio-political factors seriously. But I am concerned that to focus on these alone and sideline questions of ontological premises as immaterial may render the matrices and manipulations of wonder more rather than less obscure. If we accept cumulative or rapid change in people’s political, social, and economic situation as the sufficient causes of wonder, might we risk blackboxing (*sensu* Latour) the complexities of how change yields wonder?

Arguably, it is this blackboxing effect in Hall’s discussion of what he calls the ‘politics of wonder’ that sends wonder, inadvertently, up into the air. In his account of the rise of Silas Eto as a leader in the western Solomons, for example, Hall presents a ‘political background’ of local disputes, economic exclusion, and mission

encounter as conducive, somehow, to a generalized ‘religious fervor’ and ‘sense of foreboding’. This enables him to position Eto as someone who was then able, somehow, to ground this ambient wonder in his person. Hall tells a similar story about the so-called cargo cults of Melanesia. These, he says, were creative responses to ‘the shock of the new’, but they were not ‘irrational’, he observes. Could this observation be a sign that Hall senses the potential for blackboxing to let wonder become another word for the irrational?

The approach I advocate gives us something specific to look for inside the black box. It proposes that, somewhere in and as the precipitating ‘factors’ (Vincent) in the ‘political background’ (Hall) amidst which wonder and wonder practices emerge, we should be able to identify challenge(s) to ontological premises. This is not to say that every challenge to ontological premises is thaumagenic, generative of wonder; rather, it is to theorize that, with every wonder, there is at least one source of such challenge that is making an existential and practical difference to some person.

To study wonder, therefore, anthropologists must acquire insight into the ontological premises (or situationally diverse premises) informing the everyday problems and practices of their research participants. Once these premises begin to make sense to us as well, we can spot what ‘broader’ religious, political, economic, legal, etc., processes entail ontological implications likely to impinge on those premises. And when our consultants express or promote wonder, we are well placed to consider what ontological premises may be at stake, what is calling them into question, and why it matters.

Where Hall works, for example, logging is impinging on the thing anthropologists call kinship/relationality. So-called kinship is a primary register of ontological premises and, as Hall points out, for his consultants on Santa Isabel, ‘the ontological category of the matrilineage ... includes a territory and has totemic affiliations’. Logging, in other words, is impinging on ontological premises. It is motivating matrilineages to deny previously recognized ontological connections with the children of sons. When a matrilineage does this, it steals back from the children of sons a vital constituent of their being and treats them as radically other, as if they were composed solely of their own matrilineal substance. This, I suggest, is a thaumagenic ontological outrage, a dreadful endo-cannibalistic attack on the person. It targets its victims physically, excising part of their composition and cutting them off from sustenance that, according to received ontological premises, they should derive from their paternal matrilineages. Hence accusations of sorcery against custodians of matrilineal knowledge and acts of crocodile knowledge counter-theft.

What is the real ground of dreadful wonder here? Is it economics, kinship, politics? Or is it intrinsic to – but not identical with – all of these, *in so far as* they presuppose and perturb ontological premises?

## What keeps wonder practices going? Or, the curious incident of the wild dogs in the night-time

Wonder can be a practice through which people resist ontological premises and advance lived alternatives; but, how do such wonder practices persist? This is precisely the issue Matt Tomlinson theorizes in his contribution, employing a semiotic approach that is a fish I readily recognize, even as it swims its own way, as related to and compatible with an ontology-oriented approach.

Tomlinson considers the semiotic dynamics of what he, citing Alan Tippett, calls 'power encounters' in Christian missions. Power encounters are a literary and lived kind of wonder practice with biblical prototypes: an emissary of the biblical god encounters an agent or object (often a tree) sacred to some other power and performs a wonder, demonstrating that the power of the former is greater than that of the latter. There is a deep irony in these encounters, however: they produce wonder by reproducing what Tomlinson calls 'anti-wonder', the wonder they supposedly show is no wonder at all.

'[I]n order to gain analytical traction,' Tomlinson writes, 'it is necessary to understand what kinds of sign relationships are being set up, called upon, and challenged in any wondrous moment.' This helpfully captures the mechanism for keeping wonder alive. In order for any wonder practice to maintain thaumagenic power and become routinized, its practitioners must repeatedly set up and call upon the ontological premises they aim to challenge. In Tomlinson's words, they must keep both wonder and anti-wonder active as 'twinning possibilities'. Wonder practices and the alternative possibilities they intimate need a foil, a site of diminished but remaining anti-premises and anti-wonder that can be perpetually reinvented and refuted.

Vincent's ethnography of Aunty Joan Mob's excursions 'out bush' provides a moving instance of a carefully inculcated wonder practice that sustains itself through this dynamic of 'twinning possibilities'. The ontological anti-premise challenged is that the continuity of being between Indigenous Australians and their ancestral country has become so attenuated by non-habitation that the land 'out bush' no longer recognizes its people and is dangerous (compare Bovensiepen 2015). The fact that Aunty Joan Mob is engaged in an intra-Aboriginal land dispute generates a further anti-premise, namely, that Aunty Joan Mob is not the Aboriginal group with ancestral connections to the places they visit, and that these places will reveal this by harming them. The alternative ontological premise that Aunty Joan Mob fosters by relaxing 'out bush' is that they belong to the places they visit, and that these places, by leaving them unmolested, vindicate their claims. Furthermore, by reconnecting with their country, Aunty Joan Mob fosters the premise that other Aboriginal groups may do likewise: their identity with their places is inalienable.

Yet, despite their many safe sojourns 'out bush', Aunty Joan Mob insist that what they are doing is dangerous. Vincent acknowledges that this emphasis on danger is

hyperbolic and identifies it as a means by which Aunty Joan Mob sharpen a colonially produced distinction between domesticated and wild spaces. Additionally, I suggest, it is a means by which they produce wondrous signs that their country accepts them.

The curious incident of the wild dogs in the night-time is a compelling case in point. Vincent relates that Aunty Joan ‘firmly believed that once we were out the back we had entered a realm where dogs, rather than humans, have the more legitimate claim to reign’ and that Aunty Joan was ‘vigilant, almost obsessive, in her warnings about the danger these animals posed.’ To apply Tomlinson’s terms, these warnings set up and called upon the anti-wonder of ontological alienation and danger as preparation for the manifestation of the new wonder of identity between Aunty Joan Mob and an affirming place. Evidence of the latter transpired when, late one evening, ‘a magnificent multilayered dingo howl was heard in camp.’ The following morning, Aunty Joan Mob agreed that the dingoes had been communicating about them. The dingoes had howled to relay the information that the visitors were familiar.

This is the inverse of the curious incident of the dog in the night-time in the Sherlock Holmes story ‘The Adventure of Silver Blaze.’ In Conan Doyle’s tale, a dog recognizes someone and therefore does *not* bark. But as in ‘Silver Blaze’, there is a non-event here that becomes a meaningful event: the dingoes howled but they did *not* harm Aunty Joan Mob. It seems, in fact, that wonder often takes the form of such non-events. Whereas the Christian missionaries about whom Tomlinson writes ‘try the spirits’ by demonstrating that nothing happens when they cut down sacred trees, Aunty Joan Mob try their own ontology by demonstrating that nothing happens when they go ‘out bush’. Here too there is a ‘power encounter’, but the adversary is the rival group with which Aunty Joan Mob is in dispute.

### Wonder and ontological authority

The contributions by Nathan Bond and Jaap Timmer, Rachel Morgain, and Van Heekeren may be read as in dialogue around the theme of wonder and authority. In this section I bring them into further dialogue with Tomlinson’s analysis of the wonder/anti-wonder dynamic to explore the nature of authority and the differing roles Morgain and Van Heekeren theorize for artists and poets in relation to wonder.

Bond and Timmer focus on the All People’s Prayer Assembly (APPA), a neo-Israelite Evangelical and Pentecostal movement founded in the early 1980s by Michael Maeliau, a man from north Malaita, Solomon Islands. Maeliau’s central teachings are that Malaitans are the descendants of immigrants from ancient Israel and that Malaitan traditions are thus survivals of Mosaic Law. According to Bond and Timmer, Maeliau’s Malaitan followers respond to this ethno-theology with wonder because it announces the reversal of colonially imposed ontological premises. It gives them a new identity and tells them that, although they have

been last, they will be first in leading all people from the ends of the earth back to Jerusalem (see Timmer 2008). This wonder is twinned with an anti-wonder: Maeliau proclaims this alternative Malaitan history as a challenge to 'the West and white theologies'. And as Bond and Timmer observe, Maeliau's message is 'performative'; it is a wonder practice that stays thaumagenic through diverse iterations of this challenge. Thus routinized, moreover, 'the deployment of wonder opens up the space for religious authority to be primarily vested in the prophet' (compare Meyer 2016).

Bond and Timmer argue that Maeliau has used his authority to constructive political effect: he has communicated the wondrous new premises of his ethno-theology in ways that mobilize his followers to build alternative political forms. Morgain is likewise interested in the nexus between wonder and authority but writes about a contrasting outcome. Her focus is on elite scientists in whom a wonderstruck public has invested great authority but who fail to communicate to others – or even to grasp for themselves – the ontological premises their wondrous theories and experiments are generating. The situation Morgain describes can be redescribed as a situation of wonder/anti-wonder production. Since Hiroshima, 'a chasm of understanding' has opened up between elite scientists and the majority of people for whom science has become a source of fear and wonder. Popular awe is maintained by a wonder practice that makes an anti-wonder of Newtonian physics, continually referencing it to announce that its certainties have been overturned by relativity theory and quantum mechanics. Unlike those who grant authority to Maeliau, however, those who grant authority to scientists have been given few resources for building a 'New Jerusalem' in place of an old order 'blown to dust' by the A-bomb.

Bond and Timmer bring wonder to bear on debates about whether 'a democratic access to communication with God' among Pentecostals inhibits the emergence of figures of authority able to organize political action. With respect to Maeliau and APPA, they argue that wonder establishes the 'ontological frameworks' that 'underpin' (i.e., ground) the 'religious authority' necessary for shaping political projects. This formulation helps us to recognize something fundamental about wonder: the kind of authority that wonder confers is, first and foremost, *ontological authority*. Ontological authority is authority to reveal or explain the mysteries of being and becoming. It is authority to account for origins; lay out cosmologies, cartographies, and histories; unveil the workings of causality; tell us who we are, what is possible, and what the ethical and political implications of these realities might be (compare Scott 2015). This kind of ontological authority, I submit, has long been the core of 'religious' authority, and remains so for many. And it is because many others, in deferential awe, have transferred this authority to elite scientists that these scientists resemble sacerdotal figures in control of a dangerous inner sanctum.

Morgain develops the intriguing idea that artists may help bridge the chasm between these new high priests of ontology and the new (secular) laity. Her

interpretations of the work of Chris Henschke position Henschke as a kind of Michelangelo to the church of high-energy physics, mediating the wonders of science to the masses in palpable forms. But he is also something of a Martin Luther, a protesting reformer. His video *Burn Together* (2014) – composed around the image of a mushroom cloud – is his sensually immersive version of Luther's *Ninety-five Theses*, calling scientists to ethical accountability. And his installation *Lightcurve* (2011) is his translation of the awesome light generated at the Australian Synchrotron into a visual vernacular available to all. This is art, Morgain says, that 'replays the wonder of science at a different register.' Arguably, even if this translation falls short of initiating the laity into the mysteries of science, it causes the chasm it seeks to bridge to appear and initiates crossings.

In contrast, Van Heekeren, taking a Heideggerian existentialist approach to wonder, positions artists, poets, and myth makers as mediators of nothing but the wonder and ontological authority of Being itself. What sets them apart, she emphasizes, is their capacity to create, like the earth-divers of cosmogonic myth: 'it is artists (and I would add poets and myth makers) who excel at taking a small particle and making of it something new that is sometimes awe-inspiring.' By virtue of their creativity, in other words, artists, poets, and myth makers are all indexical icons of Being as the wonder of all wonders. Their creativity derives from and emulates the generativity of Being; it therefore always points beyond itself and its own works to the sheer awesomeness of existence.

As an exemplum of this wondrous act of imitative reference, Van Heekeren cites Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca Professional* (2010), a giant 'shit-machine' that consumes, digests, and excretes like a living organism. Viewed as a sublimation of the artist's desire to give birth to something, this work becomes, for Van Heekeren, an image of coming into being and thus a vehicle of existential wonder. Arguably, an apprehension of it as an image of Being as shit – the icon of a faecal ontology absurdly worshipped by museum visitors – could likewise induce a kind of wondrous existential laughter. Indeed, Van Heekeren seems to position artists, poets, and myth makers as akin to tricksters (often the creative accomplices of earth-divers). By continually indexing the wonder of Being, they subvert all other would-be wonders and candidates for ontological authority, unmasking them as anti-wonders and pretenders. For this reason, she reasons, they are the best hope for keeping wonder open.

### Wonder and origins

A further insight to be taken away from these articles can now be elaborated: experiences of wonder, and wonder practices as well, engage our received imagery and discourses about origins and stimulate us to think with them, generating new imagery and discourses that revise, replace, or compete with them. Several of the contributors state and/or show this explicitly. Hall writes: 'Discourses of wonder arise both in response to and are constitutive of new political circumstances. One

way these new circumstances are understood is by reimagining and retelling the tales of one's origins.' In illustration of this, he gives his account of the man who drew on the origin story of his father's crocodile lineage to stop that lineage from calling in and (re)consuming its distributed being from the children of its sons. Van Heekeren observes that '[w]onder comes to the forefront in the realm of creation myths where answers to questions about origins are sought.' Later, she tells the mullet fish story as an example of how '[t]here is untapped potential for wonder-thinking in ... stories of women who create life-sustaining substance.' And Bond and Timmer show how, by composing a new Malaitan origin myth, Maeliau gives Malaitans a wondrous Israelite identity and destiny that motivates real political innovations.

To name this nexus between wonder and origin stories, I would rephrase Van Heekeren's formulation slightly, changing one word: wonder comes to the forefront in the realm of creation myths where answers to questions about *ontology* are sought (compare Scott 2015). Thinking myth-historically, Van Heekeren may be right: the wonder of Being may be the wondrous existential event that is the origin of all origin myths. Once formed, however, our imagery and discourses about origins are among the most durable and malleable condensations of our ontological premises; hence, they occur to us when wonder strikes, and we recur to them when we want to strike with wonder. More to the point, origin stories – whether mythic, scientific, or poetic – are a privileged site of ontological authority. This is why knowing them, repeating them – and, crucially, revising or exchanging them for alternatives – makes the narrator either a personal instantiation of that authority or a challenger to become one, or both. And this is also why origin stories are such efficacious resources for asserting, modifying, or overthrowing ontological premises in order to justify, motivate, or change actions.

Within this special issue, the best evidence that the nexus between wonder and origin stories lies in the ontological premises expressed in the latter comes from J. Robert Oppenheimer's response to the first test detonation of a nuclear bomb as discussed by Morgain. Morgain tells the story of how Oppenheimer, according to his later statements, thought as he watched the awesome blast of the words of Krishna (an avatar of Vishnu) to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*: 'Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.' Was this just a learned association? Or did it announce a cosmological revolution with a seismic reconfiguration of ontology? Uttered by an elite scientist of secularized Judeo-Christian heritage, with a public of similar heritage in mind, this allusion implied a shift from biblical to Vedic premises and ethical implications: a shift from one unique creation to eternal cycles of creation and destruction, and from an ethics that locates right and wrong in the essence of specific acts to an ethics that locates right and wrong in the relationship between doers and their deeds (see Hijiya 2000). The fact that many commentators are unable to come to terms with Oppenheimer himself is evidence that, as Morgain observes, we are still in the fallout of 'generating new cosmologies.'

## Can nonhumans wonder?

Van Heekeren endorses the following quotation from Heidegger: ‘Of all beings, only the human being ... experiences the wonder of all wonders: that beings *are*’. Self-awareness, she clarifies, is the *sine qua non* for existential wonder. And the editors seem to agree, stating that ‘the heart of wonder’ lies in ‘the relationship between creation and the human’. Does this mean that nonhumans experience nothing like wonder, and that the anthropology of wonder must remain anthropocentric? Turning to Paul Keil’s contribution, I argue that his comparison of animistic ontological premises and Jakob von Uexküll’s *Umwelt* theory opens up a space for recognizing possible affective cognates to wonder among nonhumans.

Keil’s contribution concerns human-elephant encounters in Assam, Northeast India. Keil identifies the Hindu cosmology of his hosts as animistic. ‘[A]ll beings,’ he writes, ‘have the potential to become more than the current limits of their earthly forms.’ According to Hindu ontological premises, that is to say, animals may manifest divine personhood, and in the case of elephants, that divine personhood would be Ganesh.

Around the village of Chakardo where Keil worked, people live near a population of elephants. Ordinarily, they see these wild animals simply as elephants with consistent elephant traits and habits. Occasionally, however, people have encounters with elephants that induce a response Keil calls, following Véronique Servais, ‘ontological uncertainty’. The human involved is thrown into a quandary. Is the elephant Ganesh, and, if so, what might it do? This response, it should be noted, works *within* rather than against animistic ontological premises; it is driven by the fact that it is possible but exceptional for an elephant to be Ganesh. Perhaps it is for this reason that Keil describes ontological uncertainty as ‘akin to a mode of wonder’.

Three aspects of Assamese human-elephant encounters trigger ontological uncertainty, according to Keil. The first is unusual behavior; if a wild elephant does something anomalous, this may indicate the presence of Ganesh. The second is a sense that the elephant’s unusual behavior is directed at humans, that it is social behavior indicative of an ontological and moral connection between the divine person and a particular human or community. But the question of what human moral state has drawn the god’s attention often remains unclear. The third source of uncertainty is the predicament that, despite ultimate ontological continuity, the lived realities of others – whether human, animal, or divine – are unknowable.

In this third engine of uncertainty, Keil finds an intersection between his consultants’ animism and the *Umwelt* theory of Jakob von Uexküll. As he explains, von Uexküll developed an ethological model according to which the semiotic relations between a species and everything the neurophysiology of that species enables it to interpret compose a unique world, an *Umwelt*. The similarities between this post-Cartesian scientific relationism and animistic relationism are striking, indeed wondrous, to any modern Cartesian. Among these similarities, the one

Keil emphasizes is the mutual opacity posited by animists between humans and nonhumans and by von Uexküll among intersecting but never identical *Umwelten*. By virtue of this similarity, Keil and his animist interlocutors arrive at the same insight differently: that ‘the limits of what nonhumans can and cannot do, know and cannot know, is inconceivable.’

With respect to the question of nonhuman wonder, Keil’s engagement with *Umwelt* theory suggests two things. First, we cannot know that nonhumans cannot experience a kind of quasi-wonder; we cannot rule it out. Second, *Umwelt* theory offers resources for thinking about this nonhuman quasi-wonder that amount to support for an inference that there is such a thing. There may well be a nonhuman cognate to wonder for which human-like self-consciousness is not a prerequisite.

Think of an *Umwelt* as like a set of ontological premises, slowly assembled through complex semiotic processes of information exchange between a species and everything it can and must find meaningful for its existence. Should this *Umwelt* come under critical duress, would members of the species not experience perturbations, even respond with a kind of existential dread? Might a systemic crisis cause the species to experience its *Umwelt* as an entity that is behaving strangely, and might this not cause members of the species, as a form that *Umwelt* takes, to behave strangely in ways that impinge on other *Umwelten*?

Something like this is happening, I suggest, at multiple interconnected scales within the *Umwelt* some people are calling Gaia, the planetary *Umwelt* at once composed by and transcending humanity (compare Latour 2015). Our *Umwelt* is behaving strangely. In the form of freak storms, rising temperatures and sea levels, growing deserts, extinctions, threatened species, and animals increasingly ‘out of place in domesticated space’ (as Keil says of elephants that encroach on Chakardo village), our *Umwelt* is appearing to us, taking on the person-like qualities of a roused and even wrathful deity.

Some humans, for their part, are responding in wonder or ontological uncertainty (depending on their ontological premises) to these nonhuman displays of quasi-wonder. And for habitual Cartesian dualists, such displays can start to feel unnervingly inter-personal. Just as Chakardo villagers feel that unusual elephant behaviour may be directed at them, many Moderns (*sensu* Latour) are beginning to read the indices of climate change as alarming messages directed at humanity, messages that confront us with the fearful non-givenness of Gaia and the complexity of our ontological complicity in her shifting composition. People who are ready to acknowledge this complicity are calling its ongoing history the Anthropocene.

Keil mentions an incident, reported by David M. Smith (1998), about an encounter Smith witnessed between a coyote and a Canadian Chipewyan hunter. Smith accompanied the hunter one day when he went out to check his traps, and the two men discovered that a coyote had run off with a trap caught on its leg. The hunter tracked the animal, and Smith expected that he would shoot it when he met it. At the moment of encounter, however, the coyote did something unexpected. At a distance of about 40 feet from the men, it crouched for several moments,

facing them with glowing eyes; then it bounded off uninjured, leaving the trap behind. The hunter did not even raise his rifle. When Smith asked him why he did not take his prey, the hunter replied, 'Everything that happens says, "Don't shoot." This animal helps me' (Smith 1998, 415; quoted in Keil). This incident crystalizes, I suggest, what is happening to many Cartesian Moderns and transforming them, not into animists, but into post-Cartesian relationists. In wonder, they are sensing that nonhuman entities are disquieted at every scale and are looking them in the eye, calling them to accountability. Everything that happens with our *Umwelt* says, 'Don't harm.' 'This entity sustains me,' they are realizing; 'I am in this entity and it is in me.' This is why ecology is the new popular religion in the ambit of the elite religion of high-energy physics. Unlike high-energy physics, it is giving people wonders they can change the way they live by (compare Rose 2011).

### Of fish and crocodiles

The editors have kindly stated that my work on wonder has 'inspired this special issue'. This generously suggests that my research has generated something of value in the shape of ethnography and theory about wonder that others may find productive for their own work. It also encourages me to imagine that the articles in this issue in some way continue the generativity of my work, that they appropriate aspects of my work and transform them into new growth for the anthropology of wonder. Accordingly, I have occasionally referred to the Vula'a myth of the origin of mullet fish as told by Van Heekeren to figure these processes of appropriation and transformation. Where contributors could be said to have taken my approach to wonder in a different or opposite direction than I anticipated or intended, I have playfully cued my acceptance of this as surrendering control over my fish. In the Vula'a story, of course, the fish are restored in the form of food to the woman who gave birth to them, and my thinking about wonder has enjoyed the same kind of nourishing return, for which I thank all the contributors.

I realize, however, that this may be overdoing the conceit that these articles are all somehow the offspring of my work. Such a claim would rightly stir up all the contributors to call in their crocodiles and defend the autonomy of their own agendas and insights. Each of these articles is a true original with its own irreducible essence. If any of the authors find that I have diminished the reality of their work through misrepresentations of their ideas or positions, I apologize. And I urge the contributors, by all means, to call in their crocodiles. Then others can attempt to garner some of their generative power, and the anthropology of wonder can keep on getting more real.

### Acknowledgments

I thank the editors, Jaap Timmer and Matt Tomlinson, for inviting me to contribute to this special issue. The initial ideas for the Afterword were developed in conversation with Jaap and Matt, when Jaap's colleagues in anthropology at Macquarie University generously hosted me

at their ‘research week’ in 2014. This dialogue continued at the Australian Anthropological Society meetings in 2015. I am most grateful to Jaap for facilitating my participation at that conference. The Afterword has also benefitted from input from Krista Ovist at the final stages. My research on wonder in Solomon Islands discussed here was funded by the London School of Economics and the Economic and Social Research Council (grant number: RES-000-23-1170). I thank my Arosi hosts in Solomon Islands for their generosity and support.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number RES-000-23-1170] and the Wenner-Gren Foundation [grant number 5337].

## ORCID

Michael W. Scott  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2301-6924>

## References

- Bovensiepen, Judith M. 2015. *The Land of Gold: Post-Conflict Recovery and Cultural Revival in Independent Timor-Leste*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications.
- Costa, Luiz, and Carlos Fausto. 2010. “The Return of the Animists: Recent Studies of Amazonian Ontologies.” *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 1: 89–109.
- Descola, Philippe. 2013. *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Harman, Graham. 2009. *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*. Melbourne: re. press.
- Hijiya, James. 2000. “The Gita of J. Robert Oppenheimer.” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 144 (2): 123–167.
- Latour, Bruno. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Latour, Bruno. 2015. “Waiting for Gaia: Composing the Common World through Art and Politics.” In *What is Cosmopolitical Design?*, edited by Albena Yaneva and Alejandro Zaera-Polo, 21–33. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Meyer, Birgit. 2016. “How to Capture the ‘Wow’: R.R. Marett’s Notion of Awe and the Study of Religion.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22 (1): 7–26.
- Rose, Deborah Bird. 2011. *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.
- Scott, Michael W. 2007. *The Severed Snake: Matrilineages, Making Place, and a Melanesian Christianity in Southeast Solomon Islands*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.
- Scott, Michael W. 2012. “The Matter of Makira: Colonialism, Competition, and the Production of Gendered Peoples in Contemporary Solomon Islands and Medieval Britain.” *History and Anthropology* 23 (1): 115–148.
- Scott, Michael W. 2013. “The Anthropology of Ontology (Religious Science?).” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (4): 859–872.

- Scott, Michael W. 2014. "To Be a Wonder: Anthropology, Cosmology, and Alterity." In *Framing Cosmologies: The Anthropology of Worlds*, edited by Allen Abramson and Martin Holbraad, 31–54. Manchester, UK: University of Manchester Press.
- Scott, Michael W. 2015. "Cosmogony Today: Counter-Cosmogony, Perspectivism, and the Return of Anti-Biblical Polemic." *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 6: 44–61.
- Scott, Michael W. 2016. "To Be Makiran is to See like Mr Parrot: The Anthropology of Wonder in Solomon Islands." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22 (3): 474–495.
- Smith, David M. 1998. "An Athapaskan Way of Knowing: Chipewyan Ontology." *American Ethnologist* 25 (3): 412–432.
- Strathern, Marilyn. 1988. *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Timmer, Jaap. 2008. "Kastom and Theocracy: A Reflection on Governance from the Uttermost Part of the World." In *Politics and State Building in Solomon Islands*, edited by Sinclair Dinnen and Stewart Firth, 194–212. Canberra: ANU E-Press.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 2014. *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology*. Translated and edited by Peter Skafish. Minneapolis, MN: Univocal.
- Wagner, Roy. 1991. "The Fractal Person." In *Big Men and Great Men: Personifications of Power*, edited by Maurice Godelier and Marilyn Strathern, 159–173. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Willerslev, Rane. 2011. "Frazer Strikes Back from the Armchair: A New Search for the Animist Soul." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17 (3): 504–526.