

Theory as reproduction: reflections on the history of doing feminist anthropology in Australia

This roundtable invited reflection and engagement with the history of what might be called a “feminist” tradition in Australian anthropology as a vantage point on broader Australian anthropological and scholarly traditions. In doing so we sought to gather insights into the work of producing theory and the labour involved in its reproduction through the maternal line. This roundtable looked to history in the way of memories of our distinguished participants in order to reflect on how knowledge is produced in anthropology.

The roundtable emerged from the hope that attending to specific histories of gendered dynamics in anthropology may offer both new theoretical vantage points and a more inclusive discipline. Central to this is the meaning of “theory” itself as the object of anthropological value. The perceptive Australian anthropologist Marie Reay reflected on this dynamic when she wrote about her experiences as a PhD student at the Australian National University in the 1950s: ““Nadel [her supervisor] insists,” I cried, “that we go into the field with a theory. But what is a theory? What is a theory?” I demanded rhetorically.”” Building on this feminist engagement with anthropological knowledge, we asked: what does “theory” as a collection of voices and experiences include and exclude?

Despite the historical focus of the roundtable, these questions remain as crucial as ever. The roundtable was conceptualised against the backdrop of a recent turn in popular and scholarly discussion towards the university itself and the kind of relationships it engenders as a site for contestations over gender and power. For example, the feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed's recent work (i.e. *On Being Included*, ; *Living a Feminist Life*) considers the role of institutions in reproducing norms, whereas different kinds of online mobilisation have resulted in renewed attention to how gender, sexuality and race structures knowledge production itself.

The roundtable invited six participants to reflect on these events from the specific historical and cultural context of Australian feminist anthropology from the mid-20th century to present. Although the format was deliberately left open, we invited each participant to reflect on these particular questions and concerns by drawing on their own experiences, whether during fieldwork or within the university. Their responses and engagement with concepts “feminism,” “politics,” “the field,” and “theory” remain as relevant as ever for the future of anthropology and knowledge production as a whole.

The roundtable was recorded at the 2019 Australian Anthropological Society conference, held at the Australian National University in Canberra. It was convened by Benjamin Hegarty (University of Melbourne), Caroline Schuster (Australian National University) and Shiori Shakuto (University of Tokyo).