Uncommon Things

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Abstract: Uncommon things – those that challenge or unsettle; that evoke surprise, curiosity, even bewilderment; things that resist appropriation and may call our deepest assumptions into question – these are key to anthropology's recent (re)turn to questions of ontology. Recursive approaches in particular seek to explore how analysis is shaped by the forms in which what we study comes to command ethnographic attention. The "digital *taonga*" generated by a recent project in New Zealand with the Māori group Toi Hauiti offer a fertile example of how uncommon things can demand different qualities of ethnographic attention, transforming academic subjectivity into something more than, or other than, itself.

Keywords: ontological turn, material culture, digital heritage, Māori, recursive ethnography

Résumé : Les objets in-communs – ceux qui déstabilisent et perturbent, qui évoquent la surprise, la curiosité ou même la stupeur, ces objets qui résistent à l'appropriation et qui peuvent nous amener à remettre en question les plus ancrées de nos hypothèses – sont des éléments clés du récent tournant (ou retour) de l'anthropologie vers les questions d'ontologie. Les approches récursives en particulier cherchent à explorer comment l'analyse est façonnée en fonction de la manière dont les objets d'étude arrivent à générer une attention ethnographique. Le « *taonga* numérique » créé dans le cadre d'un récent projet mené en Nouvelle-Zélande avec le groupe maori Toi Hauiti évoque de façon intéressante comment des objets in-communs peuvent nécessiter d'autres qualités de l'attention ethnographique et amener à transcender ou à métamorphoser la subjectivité universitaire.

Mots-clés : tournant ontologique, culture matérielle, patrimoine numérique, Māori, ethnographie récursive

Uncommon things – those that challenge or unsettle; that evoke surprise, curiosity, even bewilderment; things that resist appropriation and may call some of our deepest assumptions into question – these are key to anthropology's recent (re)turn to questions of ontology. By "things," simply meant are the forms in which whatever we study as ethnographers comes to command our attention. They may appear as material objects; as practices or concepts; as events, institutions or beliefs; as gifts, *mana*, traps, actants, spirits or dividuals; or as structures, perspectives, networks, systems or scales. Some might not yet be named. Such things may be thought of as uncommon both in the sense of being unusual, unsettling, even virtually inconceivable, and in not being *held in common* by everyone, all the time. In relation to notions of a commons, then, uncommon things operate at least partly outside the limits of what we are, what we own, what we know, what we believe and even beyond what is.

The "digital *taonga*" generated by a recent project in New Zealand offer a fertile example of how uncommon things can demand different qualities of ethnographic attention. These emerged through an initiative to reassemble and revitalise the productions and teachings of an ancient house of learning called Te Rāwheoro, located at Uawa (Tolaga Bay) on the East Coast of the North Island. The venture involved tribal members, technologists, art historians and ethnographers. The leaders of this project, members of the group Toi Hauiti, sought out anthropologists as collaborators in building an interactive digital repository for the *taonga* (ancestral treasures) of their Te Aitanga a Hauiti kin group. In our capacity as ethnographers, our job was to support their efforts to translate these taonga – including chants, songs, images, films and material artifacts – into a digital system built by software developers according to the dynamic principles and structure of Hauiti *whakapapa*, glossed as genealogy (Ngata, Ngata-Gibson and Salmond 2012). Out of this work emerged a whole new group of

objects that Toi Hauiti christened "digital taonga": treasured aspects of their whakapapa at once ancient and contemporary, ephemeral and material, unexpected and foretold. These were relational artifacts-in-becoming (or artifact-relations) realised as lines of code: pixellated film and images, digital text, and sound files.

Toi Hauiti wanted a whakapapa-based database, because a system built according to their own ways of enabling and managing relationships (Walker 2012) would, it was thought, best serve the overarching aim to energise their kin group's artistic and economic capacities. While being an obvious extension to new technologies of whakapapa's impulse toward generative encompassment (explored elsewhere; see Salmond 2013), the unexpected things the system generated at once yielded surprising insights and unanticipated possibilities. In particular, it was not projected – nor admitted by the conceptual frameworks the project began with as a collective enterprise – that digital surrogates might themselves advance whakapapa's continued unfolding as do analogues like carved and woven heirlooms or gifts, dances, songs and people. These uncommon things challenged our ethnographic capacities to grasp, describe and analyse something we ourselves had helped create. During the project, we were required to revisit and rework our own theoretical models and epistemological categories. Moreover, the peculiar characteristics of Hauiti's digital *taonga* – the particular ways in which these things confounded expectations and defied description in both code and in ethnography – exposed assumptions built into the very concepts that informed our methods. They required nothing less than a thorough reassessment and rebuilding of the conceptual infrastructure, which, they made clear, was overdetermining the direction and results of our work.

As things generated partly through ethnographic comparisons, digital taonga helped illuminate a crucial yet often disregarded aspect of some of the most vigorously debated ideas associated with anthropology's ontological turn. Central to "recursive" ontological approaches, in particular (those beginning with the work of Roy Wagner, Marilyn Strathern and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro), is the idea that such things – as objects of ethnographic inquiry – might be treated as relationally constituted artifacts of our discipline's distinctive methodological procedures rather than as straightforwardly "out there," awaiting discovery. For recursive ethnographers, indeed, this approach is taken not only toward things like digital taonga, which arise in direct and obvious ways out of anthropological interventions, but to *anything at all subjected to ethnographic scrutiny*. No

matter how natural or given – how *common* – that which grasps our attention might seem, the recursive impulse is to approach it as a methodological effect: an artifact of ethnographic practice. When these scholars talk about "things" or about "ethnographic materials," then, they are not talking about given objects or differences. Instead, they are pointing to how what we study draws our attention *in comparison* – that is, to the ways in which things come to appear as such within ethnography's relationally constituted perspectives. In this sense, within these approaches, all objects of ethnography are uncommon things.

This is important, because it is these things that "dictate the terms of their own analysis" in recursive approaches, as one manifesto put it (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007, 4). Rather than simply collected and slotted into pre-existing theoretical categories, or deployed as a creative resource, these relationally constituted materials themselves open up unanticipated possibilities – practical, political and conceptual – that can demand novel concepts and analytic strategies. Being neither productions of individual or collective genius nor given by a generalised creation, uncommon things are nothing less than the charge of difference that lends ethnography its peculiar momentum.

Together with Toi Hauiti colleagues, I have written previously about the database project discussed below and its role within the group's broader program of revitalisation (Ngata, Ngata-Gibson and Salmond 2012; Lythberg, Ngata and Salmond forthcoming). The aim of the present article is to refine and extend a set of reflections prompted by the project about anthropological theory and methodology (first elaborated in Salmond 2013, 2014). These concern the specific methodological transformations demanded by work with Toi Hauiti and the generative limitations it placed on ethnographic practice, as well as what these might imply for the ongoing articulation of recursive ethnography. What follows, then, speaks generally to the purpose of anthropology and its capacity for effective action, but also more specifically to an ongoing series of debates about anthropology's "ontological turn" and the enduring relevance of ethnographic method.

Recursive Controversies (or, Going around in Circles)

International debates about recursive ethnography were stimulated by the edited volume *Thinking Through Things* (*TTT*) (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007) and gathered momentum through a widely discussed panel on the politics of ontology at a 2012 meeting of

the American Anthropological Association (Holbraad and Pedersen 2014; Jensen 2016). Several commentaries have since been published, many of which take a critical stance on the "ontological turn" advanced in *TTT*. The grounds on which some of these critiques are offered, together with claims made by supporters of ontological approaches, suggest that what was meant by "things" might have been more clearly articulated by the volume's editors (including myself) and that more effort could have been profitably invested in unpacking recursive approaches from other quite different ontological strategies (Salmond 2014).

For this reason, it is important to get several things straight from the outset. In particular, the emphasis placed in recursive approaches on the relational constitution of ethnography's objects should not be read as a denial that there *are* real things or differences "out there" in the world, among and within groups of people. Exponents do not subscribe to an idea that reality is socially constructed, nor do they insist on the inscrutability of "native minds" or the incommensurability of other peoples' "ontologies," whether imagined as cosmologies or as culture-like views of reality. Recursive arguments run perpendicular to these kinds of discussions, being concerned in the first instance with issues of method. The proposition is not that *everything is* relationally constituted (that we live in a relational universe); it is simply that it is through comparisons – and only through comparisons – that we *in our capacity as ethnographers* attend to whatever it is that we study.[1]

That this limits anthropology in certain ways, thus distinguishing it from other kinds of research, is viewed in a positive light as something that can be turned into a creative advantage. For instance, in defining the discipline's problem as that of "how to create an awareness of different social worlds when all at one's disposal is terms which belong to one's own" (Strathern et al. 1987, 257), the implication is not that we should abandon anthropology due to the impossibility of understanding others. On the contrary, the idea that seamlessly channelling our interlocutors' qualities to our peers might not be in our gift becomes an imperative for methodological innovation. If we are neither objective collectors of facts mined in the field nor subjective instruments for rendering socio-culturally conditioned perceptions, then what options might be left? Recursive approaches explore this question through methodological experimentation and by investigating what insights and implications (practical, philosophical, political) might be drawn out and opened up *through* ethnographic transformations – that is, via the ways in which ethnography inevitably alters what it studies while at the same time being transformed ("becoming alter to") itself (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017).

The point of emphasising the relational character of anthropology's method is thus neither to correct the errors of modernism (Subjects and objects don't exist! Everything is relational!), nor to encourage inward-looking exercises in disciplinary self-reflection. Rather, the aim is to foreground what marks anthropology out from other disciplines, as well as to keep in mind (with a view to better cultivating) the kinds of relationships our research both relies on and enables (Leach in Venkatesan et al. 2012). In responding to environments in which the relevance and worth of social sciences are now routinely called into question, this has a pragmatic aspect. Anthropologists, like other scholars, are increasingly required to justify their intellectual and social contributions in competing for resources to keep departments open, keep posts filled and secure research funding, as well as in negotiating access to the places and people with whom they work. Such procedures fuel the kinds of metaconversations about the discipline's ultimate purpose and value, of which ontological debates are just one part.

More substantively, foregrounding the relational character of ethnographic method and the objects it generates opens up new ways of addressing enduring, yet increasingly urgent, political and philosophical questions that have long preoccupied people within and beyond anthropology. Challenged by not only bureaucrats and ethnographic subjects, the discipline continues to face pointed and pertinent criticism of its project from post-colonial scholars and others based in departments of literature, ethnic studies and Indigenous scholarship, even within the discipline itself. With regard to this work, underlining the ways in which ethnographic knowledge is relationally constituted (rather than *extracted* or *appropriated* from interlocutors) is a means of taking such criticisms seriously and of offering a considered – if typically oblique – response. Here, as when addressing problems of climate change and the negative impact of humans on their own and others' environments, the idea of approaching what we study relationally implies a certain optimistic creativity. In an intellectual milieu plagued by feelings of impotence in the face of imminent catastrophe, recursive approaches offer the prospect of devising new ways to address the problems of the Anthropocene, of global warming, even the prospect of our own demise. Opening alternative perspectives that could generate unforeseen opportunities for action that might really make a difference is among recursive ethnography's more ambitious aspirations.

Different exponents see the political work of their approaches in quite different terms, however. For some (like Eduardo Viveiros de Castro), the project of disrupting the ontological status quo is inextricably bound up with that of advancing the interests of those oppressed by it – not least the "tribal peoples" among whom anthropologists have traditionally recruited their informants. For others (like Martin Holbraad and Morten Pedersen), the political implications are more open-ended (Skafish 2016). Still, a consensus prevails that unsettling ontological certainties has potential, at least, to achieve positive, even emancipatory, effects well outside the discipline. Recursive interventions thus extend all the way from direct and engaged activism in support of specific causes (like Viveiros de Castro's advocacy for the environment and on behalf of Brazilian Indians), to nuanced ethnographic juxtapositions (such as Strathern's various discussions of gender, property and personhood), to richly illustrated yet often highly technical discussions of what politics is and might become (Candea 2011; Corsín Jiménez forthcoming; Pedersen 2011). It is in these areas that dialogue is being generated between recursive approaches and strategies of cosmopolitics and political ontology – themselves strongly allied with Indigenous projects of self-determination – developed by Mario Blaser (2009, 2012, 2013) and Marisol de la Cadena (2010, 2015).

Philosophically, recursive arguments extend from a lineage that may be traced through Viveiros de Castro to the post-structuralist writings of thinkers such as Deleuze and Guattari, as well as directly to the structuralist thought of Lévi-Strauss. Going back through Strathern and Wagner to the new Melanesian ethnography, David Schneider's revolutionary critiques of the anthropology of kinship are revealed as a germinal influence (Crook and Shaffner 2011), alongside – in a more general sense – the British social anthropological tradition, grounded in ethnography. Ontological discussions in science and technology studies (STS) and in the history and philosophy of science (HPS) have supplied key interlocutors, especially Bruno Latour, as well as Isabel Stengers, Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, Annemarie Mol, John Law and Helen Verran (Jensen 2012, 2016). In light of these diverse and cross-disciplinary influences, recursive emphasis on the distinctive qualities of ethnographic method may be seen as a self-consciously anthropological intervention in certain debates playing out within and across continental philosophy (Maniglier 2010) and in disciplines including STS, HPS, material culture studies and archaeology. In addition to offering a particular vision directed at fellow anthropologists of how the discipline might be advanced, then, recursive scholars'

insistence on the fecundity of ethnographic comparison and the uncommon things it produces has already achieved wide currency in other parts of the academy.

Fundamental to such approaches is of course an idea of anthropology as a discipline defined by its signature method of ethnography: a set of practices grounded in relations of comparison (*pace* Ingold 2014). This does not mean that these scholars are invested in the "comparative method" of isolating apparently similar socio-cultural phenomena (whole societies, cultures or their parts) and lining them up like museum objects so as to speculate on the nature of their (dis)connections (*contra* Boellstorff 2016); nor does it refer simply to the time-honoured practice of casting others' exotic peculiarities into relief against the homogenised landscape of "our," supposedly Western, commonalities (Candea 2015). Instead, ethnography (and therefore anthropology) is understood to be comparative *all the way down*. The argument, alluded to above, goes something like this: the very project of seeking people out with whom to engage so as to write accounts about them addressed to our peers comes with a notion of alterity – that is, a relational contrast or comparison – already built in. For ethnography to get off the ground at all, in other words, it requires a *relation of difference within itself*: a comparison of what (or whom) is being studied and written about with those who are being addressed. A "native anthropologist" conducting ethnography "at home," for instance, thus addresses her account *about* her own people *to* her fellow anthropologists (unless she is writing another kind of text). Internal to the "I" of the auto-ethnographer is a comparison of herself as the subject doing ethnography with herself as (part of) its object, purely in terms of the way the "game" of ethnography is set up (Viveiros de Castro 2013). To the extent that this relation of alterity (anthropologists: non-anthropologists) is an irreducible aspect of the ethnographic enterprise, anthropology *is* comparison, as far as recursive approaches are concerned. Also, it is crucial to note that it is *this* alterity, internal to our method, that is in the first instance being "taken seriously" in these approaches, as opposed to the kinds of differences seen to inhere as culture-like properties in groups of people or things. Again, this does not mean that differences among and between peoples are denied by recursive ethnographers or *not* taken seriously. On the contrary, the whole point of approaching the question of what difference *is* methodologically (that is, ethnographically, for anthropologists) is precisely to give other differences the benefit of the doubt as real alternatives; that is, as genuine ontological possibilities.

Taonga

While working on our digital archive project with Toi Hauiti, the difference between relationally constituted differences and those that appear as inherent properties, or qualities of people and things, arose as an ethnographic question. Among the key concepts with which we began working was that of *taonga*, a Māori language term signifying "a treasure, something precious; hence an object of good or value" (Marsden 2003, 38). Primed by theoretical discussions on the agency of objects and of things as actants in networks of relations, we anthropologists were interested in the way taonga, such as carved ancestral figures, were often spoken of and treated as living persons. Caressed, dressed in woven garments or adorned with feathers, they were sometimes sung to and even *hongi*'d (the pressing of noses to share *hau*, the breath of life). The way Toi Hauiti spoke about certain greenstone hand weapons, carvings or particular rocks in their landscapes seemed to support the idea that these things were taonga in and of themselves – potent entities able to assert their *mana* (potency, authority) over people and places, sometimes with devastating effect. Until the early twentieth century, they explained, there had been *tohunga* (ritual experts) who knew the chants and rites to keep such volatile forces in balance, but the efficacy of these practices has since been compromised, not least through the effects of the New Zealand government's 1907 Tohunga Suppression Act. These uncommon things, at least, remain dangerous if approached in certain ways.

Marcel Mauss (1950 [1925]) first brought the concept of taonga to international attention in his "Essai sur le don," first published as *The Gift* in 1954 (Mauss 1990). Referring to a letter written in the 1890s by the Māori elder Tamati Ranapiri in response to a query from ethnologist Elsdon Best, Mauss argued that when a taonga is exchanged, it carries with it *hau*, "the spirit of the gift," an animate force binding those involved in the transaction – persons and things – into a cycle of reciprocity, impelling the receiver to make a return. But whereas for Mauss (1990, 13) taonga appeared as a mere "vehicle" for the mana of the gifting party and his kin group, as well as for the hau of the gift, Ranapiri expressed himself rather differently:

> The *taonga* that I received for these *taonga* (which came from you) must be returned to you. It would not be fair (*tika*) on my part to keep these taonga for myself, whether they were desirable (*rawe*) or undesirable (*kino*). I must give them to you because *they are a hau of the* taonga *that you gave me*. If I kept this other *taonga* for myself, serious harm might

> befall me, even death. This is the nature of the hau, the hau of personal property, the hau of the *taonga*. (Mauss 1990, 11; emphasis added)

According to Ranapiri, one taonga exchanged for another does not simply *carry* the hau of the gift, but rather it *is* its hau, translated elsewhere by Best (1900, 189) as "the vital essence or life principle." There is therefore a relation of identity *within* such taonga – between thing-as-taonga and hau or "spirit" – aspects that were separated out in Mauss's analysis.[2]

In discussing such things and how to incorporate them into the Te Rauata database, we at first thought we were working with a common concept of material taonga as artifacts that are themselves person-like agents, capable of exercising force, movement and even intentionality. Far from passive vehicles, containers or representations of ancestral effect, taonga emerged as living ancestors in their own right. This impression was fortified by reading about photographs and digital images as taonga in the work of Māori architectural and art historian Deidre Brown. Writing about the long-standing tradition of hanging photographs of deceased kin inside meeting houses alongside or in place of carved ancestor panels, and of arraying them around coffins during funerals, Brown (2008, 63) notes that

> the rendered image is … regarded as a living presence as both an object and an agent of its subject matter. This is apparent in *whare runanga* (Maori meeting houses) and museums, where carved and photographic representations of ancestors and the more recently deceased are addressed as if they were the people portrayed.

The relation between these images and the people represented is not merely one of visual resemblance, Brown observes. Instead – as with carved ancestor panels – the mana of the person extends to their photograph, which is similarly held to be "animated" by other personal attributes, including *tapu* (sacredness), *wairua* (enduring spirit) and *mauri* (life force) (Tapsell 1997). For this reason, as New Zealand institutions have become more "culturally responsive to Māori perceptions" in a bicultural policy environment, artifacts including photographs and their digital surrogates held in museums and archives may be subject to usage restrictions, designed to minimise the possibility of danger to the viewer or to the *taonga* caused by "culturally inappropriate" handling (Brown 2008). Such policies have been extended to online collections, as well. For a time, Auckland Art Gallery, for instance, requested visitors to its web-based catalogue restrict their viewing of Māori digital images to "study areas only," noting that

"the presence of food and drink or display in inappropriate ways will denigrate their spiritual significance" (Francis and Liew 2009; see also Brown 2008, 70). Following this precedent, Brown suggests that institutions consider adopting similar policies with regard to born-digital objects, including virtual Māori people, whether they recognisably represent a "real" person or not.

When I discussed this with members of Toi Hauiti, they pointed to a recent inflation of the term *taonga*, whereby it has increasingly come to be used, in both Māori and English, for any "Māori-style" cloak, carving or pendant, regardless of its history, its whakapapa (genealogy) or its meaning. Taonga is a broad category anyway, encompassing not just material objects but also knowledge, art forms, landscape features, organisms and even people. The particular form a taonga can take is indeed subject to almost infinite variation (Ngata, Ngata-Gibson and Salmond 2012). Toi Hauiti explained that anything is a potential taonga insofar as it can be woven into the fabric of Hauiti whakapapa and *matāuranga* (knowledge), and anything generated out of these relations can be a taonga, no matter what its form. What was crucial in Toi Hauiti's definition was the quality of a taonga's relationships, evident not least in the *kōrero* (talk, stories) through which these are perpetuated:

> Something that to one person might appear as "just an artefact" could be a *taonga* to someone who knows and/or is part of its history and kinship networks. Artifacts that have become detached from their stories and whakapapa are only potential taonga until these connections are reanimated and the object is restored as the living face of those relationships. (Ngata, Ngata-Gibson and Salmond 2012, 242)

For this reason, Toi Hauiti explained, they would themselves not advocate a one-size-fits-all "culturally appropriate" way of handling digital taonga, but rather one reflective of where users and taonga are potentially able to position themselves in the dynamic matrices of whakapapa relations.

I was at first disappointed with this response, as it seemed to suggest that a thing's taonga status is merely socially constructed. Instead of powerful things with their own person-like qualities, it suddenly appeared that these were just common things to which potency had been attributed by people. A gap had opened up within our working concept of taonga that, it turned out, was to have decisive technical implications.

Two Kinds of Relational Databases

In January 2012, we gathered at Uawa with Toi Hauiti and their system's technical developers to discuss the

Figure 1: Te Rauata workshop, Tolaga Bay High School, January 2012 (author's photograph)

principles that would shape their repository's formal architecture and the kinds of data that would populate it (Figure 1). At the time, it was not yet clear what sorts of digital entities were to be incorporated into Te Rauata's databases – the tabulated "objects" to which the different file types (JPEGs, MP3s, PDFs and so on) could be linked and made searchable through the tracing and tranching of digital relationships. To establish the database schema, the developers maintained, they needed Toi Hauiti to tell them what they wanted to put into the system, how these data would be related, and how they wanted users to access it.

To kick off discussion, one of the software programmers began by showing a series of slides illustrating how he was thinking about the system's structure (Figure 2). This began with a diagram of a "thing," which was then "related" to other things to form a "network," which was illustrated as a constellation of circles (things) connected by lines (relationships). The network representing the Te Rauata system was then related to another identically structured system called KIWA. KIWA is a museological database in Cambridge, England, that, it was envisaged, would exchange digital information about specific Hauiti taonga in overseas museums with Te Rauata.

The symmetry of the two systems as depicted in the diagram on the right showed that the conceptual basis of the relational framework proposed for Te Rauata was derived in the programmer's imagination from that of the already operating KIWA system, itself based on database structures developed for museum online catalogue systems (Hogsden and Poulter 2012). This was an "artifact-centric" network in which digital objects representing individual material artifacts (including museum objects, as well as labels, catalogue cards, register entries
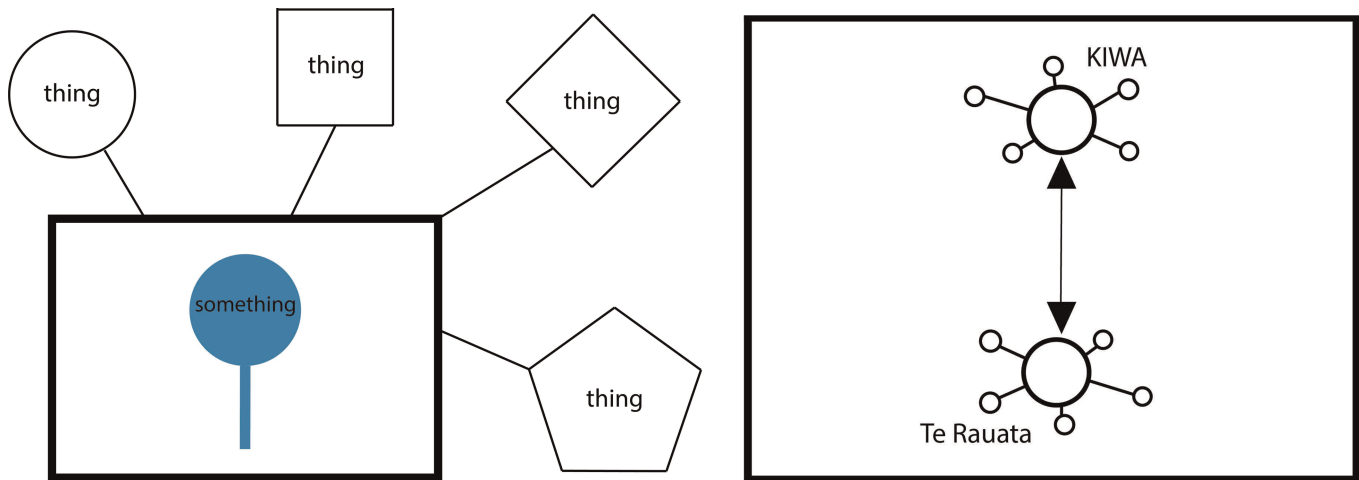
Figure 2: Software developers' diagrams of interrelated database systems (images courtesy of Carl Hogsden)

and photographs) were uploaded into the system *before being related* to each other and to further contextual information (for example, biographies of collectors and records of transfers and exchanges). The relations then programmed in between these things became digital objects in their own right, charged with the function of connecting diverse pieces of digital information.

In response to this slide presentation, Toi Hauiti began by introducing the Māori concept of *mea* as an alternative to the term *thing*. Mea, they explained, better conveyed their vision of the constituent parts of the Te Rauata system. It is an encompassing term that can be used to embrace all the different digital objects that were to go into Te Rauata, from people, to carved ancestral objects, to landscapes, to their relations within Hauiti whakapapa. As one Māori language dictionary defines it, when used as a noun, the word *mea* evokes a wide range of possibilities:

> 2. (noun) thing, object, property, one, reason, thingu-majig, thingy, thingummy, whatcha-me-call-it, what-d'you-call-it, the one, that thing, whatsit – a word used to replace the name of something, often when a speaker has momentarily forgotten the correct word. It may function as a personal name, a location word, a noun or a verb … *Ka mea a Mea ki te mea nā. /* So-and so spoke to that thing. (*Māori Dictionary* 2017)

Speaking for Hauiti, Wayne Ngata was careful to point out that while some Māori speakers might consider it derogatory to apply the term *mea* to certain kinds of things, he wanted the workshop participants to use it "because of its characteristic as a common denominator."

In expanding on the mea that would populate their database system, Toi Hauiti introduced their whakapapa

(genealogies), giving the names of ancestors that define Te Aitanga a Hauiti as an *iwi* (tribal grouping), beginning with Hingangaroa, father of the eponymous ancestor Hauiti, who established the renowned school of learning Te Rāwheoro in the sixteenth century (Walker 2012). They talked about important taonga that had belonged to these forebears, some of which remain in their tribal territories, while others reside elsewhere in New Zealand or overseas. Among their most important taonga is the *patu pounamu* (greenstone hand weapon) Kapuārangi, which was formally returned to them by the Tairāwhiti Museum in 1999 (Figure 3). It had been taken from a gravesite some years earlier, and its repatriation was a major catalyst in Hauiti's efforts to revitalise Hingan-garoa's legacy. A carved *poupou* (wall panel) associated with the ancestress Hinematioro, possibly gifted to the Tahitian Tupaia during Cook's visit to Uawa in 1769 and now held in a museum in Tübingen, Germany, was another of the taonga mentioned. This ancestral figure has been visited by several delegations of Hauiti people over the past decade (Figure 4); these events were reported in the German media and recorded in a docu-mentary for the Māori Television network, and such footage was also to be incorporated into the repository. Each of these mea appeared in their accounts as a nexus or knot-like tie encompassing myriad constellations of events, names, relationships and initiatives dedicated to the perpetuation and continuing renewal of *Hauititanga* – that is, of being Te Aitanga a Hauiti.

While mea was put forward as a "common denomi-nator" to encompass all the things that would be incor-porated into the database system – a starting point for their (digital) translation – the particular mea invoked by Toi Hauiti stood out as "uncommon" in at least two senses. First, these mea define Hauiti, within the terms

Figure 3: The return of the greenstone mere Kapuārangi (photograph courtesy of Tairāwhiti Museum)

Figure 4: Members of Toi Hauiti with Hinematioro's *poupou*, Tübingen, Germany (photograph courtesy of Volker Harms and Stefanie Hildebrand)

of their whakapapa, as a body or group distinct from others. These objects (including people), singly and collectively, are the very stuff of Hauititanga ("Hauiti-ness") – that is, of what it is to be Te Aitanga a Hauiti in relation to something else (for example, Rongowhakaata or Ngāti Porou – other local kin-group configurations). The mea incorporated into Te Rauata are thus uncommon in the sense that they are "not shared" by outsiders, as defined within the terms of Hauiti whakapapa. (Although one might whakapapa to both Rongowhakaata and Hauiti, or be both Te Aitanga a Hauiti and Ngāti Porou, these are not simultaneous perspectives). Second, some of these mea (in digital form and otherwise) are uncommon in the sense of "unusual, remarkable, exceptional" in that their custodianship – including knowledge of them, their names and their histories – entails responsibilities that place limits on their access and use, including their deployment as a scholarly resource. Mea such as these are taonga, as noted above: "a treasure, something precious; hence an object of good or value. The object or end valued may be tangible or intangible; material or spiritual" (Marsden 2003, 38).

There was also a third sense in which mea emerged unexpectedly from these discussions as uncommon. As an alternative to "things," they are both more and less than the common notion of the thing, in neither *preceding* the dynamic relational matrices that define them, nor being precisely *extractable from* those relations post-facto, for instance, as mere vehicles of human sociality. Neither given nor socially constructed, mea required of us anthropologists and software developers nothing less than a radical shift in perspective. Familiar

coordinates no longer applied; we were being asked to work on quite a different scale. In the system envisaged by Toi Hauiti, relations were not just *connections between* entities, the prior distinctiveness of which was given. Rather, they were their very substance and conditions of possibility.

This only really started to became clear some months after the workshop, following a period of impasse between the technical developers and Toi Hauiti. Still thinking in terms of a database architecture "populated" by "content," the developers had requested samples of the kinds of "things" the system would need to incorporate. This, they maintained, was an essential preliminary step without which they would not be able to mock up different kinds of connections and pathways through the data. Somehow, though, this material was not forthcoming, and the developers regarded this as holding up the project. After further meetings and discussion, it transpired that a crucial aspect had been left out of the planning. Toi Hauiti explained that rather than starting with individual digital objects and then connecting them, nothing could enter the Te Rauata system if it was not *already related*. Out of these deliberations, it was established that what was needed was a "data-relater": a system whereby Hauiti could preliminarily position mea within their whakapapa before the mea were uploaded into Te Rauata.

Whakapapa

Already at the workshop in January, Toi Hauiti had explained that they not only wanted artifacts of their whakapapa, including genealogies and oral histories, to be incorporated within Te Rauata; they also wanted

their whakapapa to generate the structure of the database and the ontology of the system itself.[3] In trying to get their heads around this, the technical developers presented some slides of diagrams drawn from popular family tree database programs, to give an idea of the different ways in which Te Rauata's content could be represented back to users once it had populated the database schema. This set off a conversation about the workings of whakapapa in relation to genealogy, with the anthropologists and Toi Hauiti trying to explain it in different terms to the developers. Whereas the anthropologists drew on their own ethnographic experience, mainly with other Māori kin groups and ethnographic literature to develop a generalised account of distinctively Māori ways of reckoning relatedness, Toi Hauiti were more concerned with talking about particular ancestors, land- and seascape features and taonga (noted above) that defined them as a kin group.

What we anthropologists were trying to get across is that *whakapapa* (literally "to make layers") is a Māori language term usually translated as "genealogy," though it has migrated into everyday New Zealand English (the main language used at the workshop) to signify distinctively Māori ways of reckoning relations of affiliation and descent. In common parlance, one's whakapapa is one's family tree; to have Chinese, Samoan and Māori whakapapa is to descend from all those peoples. At the same time, using the term *whakapapa* as opposed to, say, *lineage* or *family history* indicates familiarity with particularly Māori notions of relatedness. In practice, and especially when used by speakers of Māori, it invokes a continuously unfolding generative complex of ideas, processes, places, people, other beings and artifacts that may be considered both to exceed and to be incommensurable with genealogy. As several anthropologists have observed, indeed, whakapapa is a relational field – or fabric – of cosmogonic proportions (Prytz-Johansen 1954, 9; Sahlins 1985a, 195; Salmond 1991, 39–44; Tapsell 1997) encompassing everything there is: animals, plants, landscapes and inanimate objects, as well as people. Whakapapa is thus much more than genealogy narrowly conceived; from the beginning, ethnographers and Māori have noted its centrality to every aspect of Māori existence: its role in shaping – if not determining – not just social relations but their very conditions of possibility (Salmond 2013).

Judging by the impasse that arose after the workshop, however, our attempts to explain whakapapa to the developers by drawing comparisons we thought they could relate to were not extremely successful. While we anthropologists felt we had a good grasp of the differences between whakapapa and genealogy, we continued to struggle, as well, to find the right terms in which to describe these to our colleagues on the project and to fellow anthropologists in publications and conference presentations.

Our problem, in a nutshell, was that "in much conventional parlance relations presuppose already existing entities" (Strathern 2017). In trying to impress upon our colleagues that whakapapa is "relational," we kept inadvertently conjuring a way of thinking about whakapapa relations with distinctive notions of the thing, the person, the concept and the relation already built in. Mea was meant to unsettle such ontological certainties, but we had thus far failed to explore the implications of these "uncommon things" for how we were talking about relations. What we needed to get across was the extent to which whakapapa differs from the genealogical-type relations characteristic of most relational databases, such that they might be said to belong to a different scale. Toi Hauiti had impressed upon us that a different kind of relational database ontology would need to be developed. The practical question – to which the "data-relater" offered an interim solution – was where to start building a system in which everything is already related.

This kind of problem, as it happens, is among recursive ethnography's major preoccupations: how to develop alternative ways of thinking and talking about relations when the terms themselves and the concepts they contain are *already related* in distinctive ways?

Things as Ethnographic Materials

Among the perennial criticisms offered of recursive approaches is that they are "sociological" in orientation, as evidenced by their emphasis on the relational character of ethnographic method and its objects of inquiry. Whereas it is argued that other scholars attend to the realities of the world and its material conditions, recursive scholars limit themselves to the study of idealised social forms ("gifts," "dividuals," "shamanism," etc.) removed from their interlocutors' everyday lives. This is not only superficial and abstract compared to the philosophical depths of phenomenology, or to the political investments of historical materialism, critics have asserted; it is also thoroughly anthropocentric. Recursive methodologies, it is argued, limit anthropology to what Ingold (2000, 340) has called the "realm of discourse, meaning and value … conceived to hover over the material world but not to permeate it," restricting the discipline's ability to engage in an unmediated way with both non-humans and materiality.

For those who have taken the time to read recursive work in detail, however, as for those who experiment with such approaches, these critiques seem deeply ironic.

They neatly demonstrate a key insight of recursive scholarship, namely that our distinctive ways of thinking about relations profoundly colour anthropology's assessment of others. The way the term *relation* is assumed to imply *social* relations is a case in point. Extrapolated to a "sociological orientation," these terms conjure others, not least the "biological" (or "genealogical") relations seen to provide human sociality's ground or condition of possibility. Despite the efforts of recursive scholars to call the universal relevance of such distinctions and their analogues into question, then – and to point out the challenges of articulating alternatives – they are repeatedly accused of unwittingly and unreflexively reinscribing the very contrasts their approaches seek to unsettle.

This was a particular problem with regard to the methodological proposals laid out in *Thinking Through Things* (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007). The book's introduction opened with a question: "What would an artefact-oriented anthropology look like if it were not about material culture?" (1). The aim was to query the treatment of objects and materiality in anthropology, in particular the division of labour whereby "social anthropology could proceed independently of the study of material culture" (Strathern 1990, 38). The book's approach was to mobilise ethnography to open up spaces through which alternative ways of approaching "materials" could emerge, calling the ubiquity of anthropology's customary ontological distinctions (for instance, between sociality and materiality, objects and subjects, persons and things) into question. Yet *TTT*'s approach has been repeatedly criticised for being too anthropocentric and for neglecting the fact that while "meaning cannot exist outside of human sociality … [ob]jects, however, can, and do" (Geismar 2011, 215). While promising newly invigorated artifact-oriented approaches, others argued, *TTT*'s methodological reliance on ethnography in fact reinscribed a conventional *anthropo*-logic by privileging the accounts and actions of human subjects over material substance and agency. Far from advancing a radical new way of dealing with things as more than vessels or tools of people, the book is said to reproduce the very division of labour it seeks to challenge: between scholars who focus on social relations on one hand and those who deal with material objects on the other.

Common to these critiques is the idea of a self-evident distinction between what people make of things on one hand and what those things are, in and of themselves, on the other. In light of the book's concern to disrupt the anthropological habit of naturalising such contrasts, the charge of anthropocentrism touched a nerve among the editors and contributors, inspiring a series of engagements designed to lay out more explicitly just how "things" might be dealt with recursively, and

what addressing them "on their own terms" might mean (Holbraad 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Holbraad and Pedersen 2009; Holbraad, Pedersen and Viveiros de Castro 2014; Venkatesan et al. 2012; see also Pedersen 2012).

In his paper "Can the Thing Speak?" Martin Holbraad (2011), for instance, allows that *TTT*'s ostensibly "artifact-oriented" approach does indeed come across as people-centric, not least in the rhetorical thrust of its argument. He muses on an analogy drawn by archaeologist Severin Fowles, who places *TTT* with theoretical approaches, such as actor network theory, which, Fowles argues, seek to "emancipate" objects from modernist dichotomies in a manner modelled on the post-colonial emancipation of colonial subjects. In *TTT*'s introduction, Holbraad admits, just such a connection is indeed drawn by the editors between their project of "taking seriously" artifacts' capacity to pre-empt Cartesian contrasts and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's campaign for an anthropology dedicated to the "permanent decolonization of thought." Rather than emancipating things *as such*, Holbraad concedes, *TTT* can be read as primarily invested in liberating artifacts *by association* – as a side effect of the conceptual emancipation of ethnography's traditional (human) subjects. In this reading of the book's introduction, he notes, things clearly cannot speak on their own account (hence his play on the title of Gayatri Spivak's seminal post-colonial essay).

At the same time, Holbraad (2011) counters, *TTT*'s rhetorical emphasis on conceptually emancipating people "pastes over" a more radical possibility entailed in its argument, one that exploits what he calls (after Ingold) the "conceptual affordances" of ethnographic "materials." The remainder of his paper is devoted to laying out how *TTT*'s methodology indeed encourages attention to "the more 'thingy' qualities of things," fleshing out the case with his own research on the *aché* powder used by Cuban diviners. Arguing that this powder yields its own concepts heuristically "by virtue specifically of its material characteristics," he proposes that despite the "human-oriented agendas to which such analyses – anthropological after all – are directed," they may nonetheless "involve an irreducibly thing-driven component or phase." Things *can* speak in a limited sense, to the extent that "they can yield their own concepts" (Holbraad 2011, 22; see also Holbraad 2012a, 2013).

Like Holbraad's power-powder, both mea and taonga (whether in the form of material objects, digital files, texts, songs or other forms of skilled practice and knowledge) exceed distinctions like material/spiritual or object/subject in ways that confound attempts at their translation and ethnographic analysis. Aside from the heuristic yield of their material characteristics, this very lack of

fit – the *uncommon*ness of these things in relation to the conceptual repertoire of both anthropology and digital technology – is productive, in this case generating an imperative for methodological innovation. Out of Toi Hauiti's efforts to translate their taonga and mea into digital objects has arisen Te Rauata, a relational constellation of uncommon things designed to enable Hauiti whakapapa to continue to generatively (re)produce itself for present and future generations.[4]

Approaching Material Culture Recursively

In addition to such apparently exotic things as aché or mea and taonga, however, the sorts of uncommon things I, for one, had in mind in *TTT* included objects of the kind customarily grouped under the rubric "material culture." This is a category which, like mea, encompasses both special, highly valued things such as taonga (and potential taonga), as well as more pedestrian artifacts that may be uncommon in the sense of "not shared": things whose material qualities constitute differences within and between themselves and others. These might include ethnographic or archaeological specimens, like ceramic pots whose technological and aesthetic features constitutively distinguish, in comparison, a particular culture or kin group (such as the Lapita, a proto-Polynesian culture consisting of assemblages of archaeological fragments – notably, distinctively patterned potsherds). A point we tried to make in *TTT* is that such apparently prosaic things are not necessarily, in ethnographic practice, any less conceptual (or more material) in the ways we might approach them ethnographically than things like gifts (or commodities or actor networks); on the contrary, they may act analogously to at once enable and constrain the particular comparisons ethnographers conceptually and materially (re)produce.

Take, for instance, the Māori weaving technique of *whatu* and its artifacts, many examples of which may be found in museums worldwide. Some of these, like the kiwi-feather cloak gifted by the Arawa people to Queen Elizabeth of England and held in trust for her at the National Museums of Scotland, are taonga when approached from within the relational perspectives that produce them as such (and which, as living participants in those relations, they continue to help keep active, being taken with Her Majesty on visits to New Zealand and being visited by Arawa descendants). Other woven artifacts have become detached from the kōrero, matāuranga and whakapapa that allow them to appear as taonga, existing as taonga *in potentia* until those relations are reconstituted, as may happen for instance through historical research (Tapsell 1997, 2012). Yet even in the absence of contextualising documentation or oral histories, such artifacts can speak ethnographically – and not just through the heuristic affordances of their material characteristics, which require a particular kind of subject after all – one that can see them as "materials" in the first place. Like the artifacts and performances discussed by Strathern (1990, 30) in "Artefacts of History," a cloak may be "grasped for itself," both quite literally, in being physically handled, and in terms of "its consequences for the future … in short, its further effect." Comparisons generated within the different nonsimultaneous (because relationally defined) perspectives, such things both open and contain can suggest new ways of approaching them that in turn open further possibilities. It is with a view to such "further effects" that artifacts like woven cloaks and the techniques used to produce them are to be incorporated into Te Rauata in the form of photographs, videos and descriptions that, it is envisaged, will help to ensure the survival of these skills (themselves taonga) among future generations.

I was taught the techniques of whatu by Hinemoa Harrison and Eddie Maxwell, leading practitioners of the art, and by Maureen Lander, an artist and lecturer in Māori art and material culture at the University of Auckland. First, we learned how to cut flax leaves from the plant so as to ensure its survival, then to split the leaves into workable sections, before slitting the skin of the leaves and stripping out the fibre using the edge of a mussel shell. Once we had extracted the silky white fibre or *muka*, we were shown how to divide it into hanks to be *miro*'d on the thigh, thus producing a length of thread suitable for weaving. When we had made a sufficient number of threads, we were taught how to set up the *whenu*, or warp threads in preparation to begin weaving (Figure 5). In whatu, each line of wefts is an *aho*, a word that evokes the *aho tīpuna* – the ancestral lineage linking the *papa* or generational layers in whakapapa (genealogies). To *kanoi* is to weave the main thread of a garment, and it is also to trace one's ancestry (Salmond 1997, 207). These and other linguistic parities suggest rich homologies between whatu and relations of descent, indicating that familiarity with the technique might offer "conceptual purchase" (Küchler 1999) when it comes to engaging with Māori kinship and its terminology (Figure 6).

Such insights are gleaned not just via soaring heuristic improvisations on the theme of a thing's "material affordances" – a sort of jazz-like conceptual riffing – but also, more prosaically, by having to shift between the relationally defined perspectives that artifact-oriented research demands. Whereas in one instance an ethnographer might be a novice weaver, learning techniques
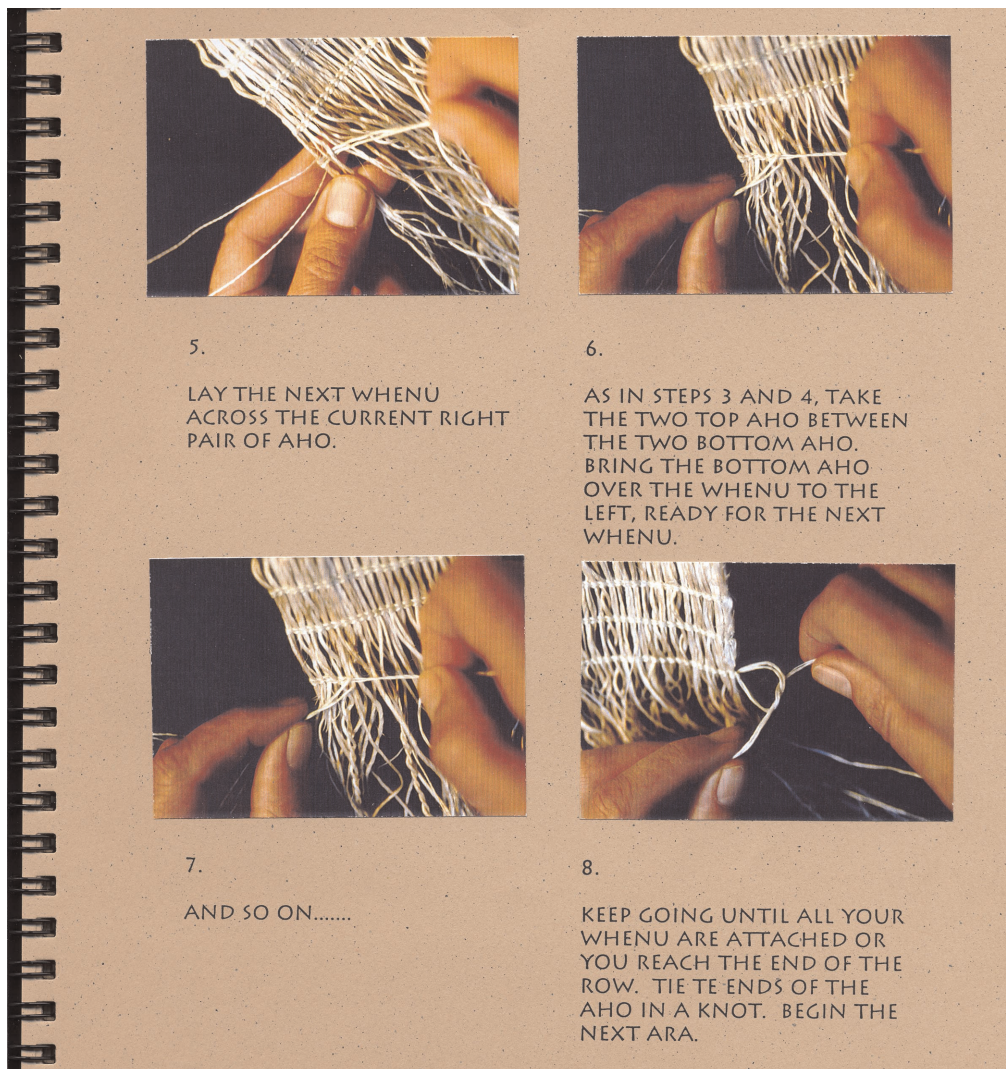
Figure 5: The technique of *whatu* (author's photograph)

that were traditionally instilled via ritual incantations that made the initiate a conduit for ancestral efficacy (Best 1924; see also Henare 2005; Mead 1969), in another, she might attempt to describe a technique or artifact in "objective" terms – that is, she takes up a position of subjectivity that enables it to be seen as an object. In still other situations, the researcher might study relevant ethnographies or artifact studies or etymological dictionaries. She might join a group like Toi Hauiti on their visit to a museum, where they greet artifacts in the collections as ancestors, then proceed to recount in historical terms how the object came to be where it is according to its documentation, kōrero that might be supported or challenged by Hauiti tribal accounts and oral histories. Moving between ever-mobile perspectives that are continually (re)constituted through the different constellations of relations in play, she will in one moment be talking *about* things with a curator, then handling a cloak to work out how aho and whenu are interwoven, then perhaps talking *to* it, weeping over it, feeling the *ihi*, the *wehi* and *wana* that can charge the air in a taonga's presence (Tapsell 2012). Through these kinds of transformations, too, when approached ethnographically, uncommon things constantly alter *us*, just as they are altering from themselves.

What is brought forth in such working comparisons is the multiplicity of ways in which uncommon things demand different qualities of ethnographic attention, such that they transform ethnographic subjectivity into something other than itself. I do not mean (*pace* Miller 1987) that objects and subjects produce each other dialectically. The Möbius strip–like qualities of the dialectic (Badiou 2011) form a closed circuit that would seem to elide the generative fecundity of the kinds of relations
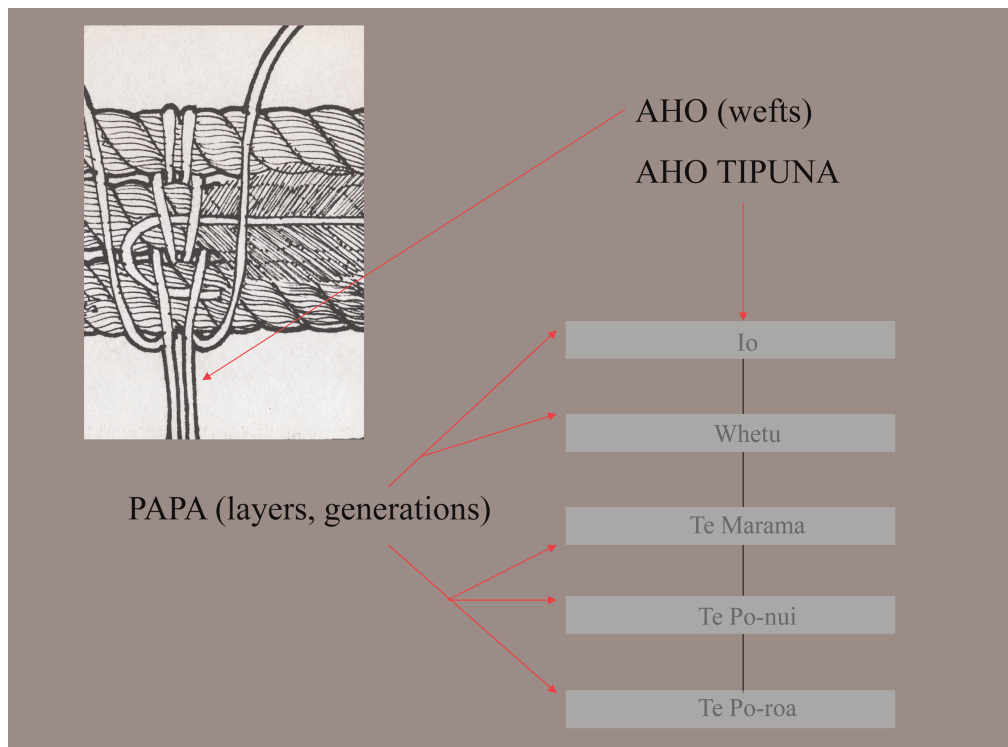
Figure 6: *Whatu* and *whakapapa* (author's image)

we are dealing with here. These keep suggesting new possibilities by bringing ever more relations into being – comparisons of different kinds that, in revealing different things, invite different subjectivities, or something else altogether. It is by opening ourselves to these possibilities, as well as acknowledging the limitations and responsibilities entailed by such things, that we become something other than stable ethnographic subjects. Unexpected things – not-quite subjects, not-quite objects – keep appearing via processes that are recursive rather than dialectical: open-ended double spirals, not closed loops.

In a recent think piece, Holbraad, Pedersen and Viveiros de Castro (2014) extend the argument first laid out in *TTT* to make a case for the ontological turn's radical political potential. Here, "ethnographic materials" afford not only novel concepts but also novel ontological (and therefore political) possibilities: they serve as a potent resource from which the real potential, and political potency, of alternative ways of being might be elicited. In this new manifesto, the recursive method proceeds by way of thought experiments "precipitated by ethnographic exposures"; that is, they are artfully drawn out of the (relationally constituted) materials of ethnographic analysis. Thus,

what distinguishes [this version of] the ontological turn from other methodological and theoretical orientations [is] the ambition, and ideally the ability, to pass through what we study, rather as when an artist elicits a new form from the affordances her material allows her to set free, releasing shapes and forces that offer access to what may be called the dark side of things … Such material can be drawn from anywhere, anytime, and anyone; there is no limit to what practices, discourses, and artifacts are amenable to ontological analysis. (Holbraad, Pedersen and Viveiros de Castro 2014, n.p.)

This new recursive manifesto remains supportive of post-colonial agendas, yet in revisiting Viveiros de Castro's earlier call for anthropology to become "the science of the ontological self-determination of the world's peoples," the authors are careful to distance their approach from more familiar post-colonial strategies, such as ethnic nationalism and strategic essentialism. While deriving critical momentum from the Brazilian's youthful ambition to make anthropology "an indispensable accompaniment to [Indigenous peoples'] political self-determination" (Viveiros de Castro 2003), then, the agenda articulated here seeks to operate on a plane quite different from that of an advocacy politics of identity. Rather, working in the background of such

struggles, ethnographic description is to be deployed as a technology for rendering difference "*viable as a real alternative*" by laying out new possibilities for "*how things could be*" (n.p.; original emphasis).

This provocative formulation is inspiring in its gesture toward the prospective, open-ended attitude of recursive approaches and their aspiration to generate not only new ways of doing anthropology but also novel political and philosophical possibilities. What may be obscured by the virtuoso figure of the ethnographer-as-artist "passing through" what she studies, however, is the importance of the vulnerability recursive methods entail. As Viveiros de Castro (2013, 474) emphasises, in such relations (because they are relations), the ethnographer must be open to transformation, too, since what might become of her (like any other) cannot be determined in advance. As in STS approaches to practical ontology (Gad, Jensen and Winthereik 2015), she works alongside others similarly engaged in their own projects of "controlled equivocation" (Viveiros de Castro 2004), "infinition" or "ontography" (Holbraad 2008, 2009a, 2012b). And when it is allowed that uncommon things like mea, taonga or whakapapa may also assert themselves, carrying the relational contexts they contain over into anthropological discourse and practices, then not only can different kinds of ethnographic objects appear, but the analyst is invited (even required) to become a different kind of subject – perhaps not even an ethnographic subject at all.

Rather than privileging the ethnographer rhetorically as the prime locus of recursive creativity, then, it ought to be made clear that recursive approaches seek to broaden the constituency of participants actively involved in the "game" of anthropology, not least by allowing them to differ from themselves. "Difference" in these approaches is that which continually, yet unpredictably, emerges from meetings, encounters and interactions and the comparisons to which they give rise: the analogies and contrasts we and our interlocutors are always making. In this sense (as far as recursive ethnography is concerned), difference is relations – specifically, the relations of (non)comparability that command our attention as uncommon things.

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Notes

1 An indispensable discussion on the recursive critique of comparative method and the distinctive ways in which comparison is mobilised in such approaches (particularly in the work of Marilyn Strathern) was published as this article went to press (Lebner 2017).

2 He goes on, however, in reference to Andamanese gifts to emphasise their intermingling: "Souls are mixed with things; things with souls. Lives are mingled together, and this is how, among persons and things so intermingled, each emerges from their own sphere and mixes together. This is precisely what contract and exchange are" (Mauss 1990: 25–26).

3 In information science, *ontologies* are taxonomic hierarchies designed to enable data to be shared across diverse systems and platforms. This usage differs substantially from deployments of the term in anthropology.

4 Development of the database is currently on hold while members of Toi Hauiti pursue other projects, including a role in Google's Indigenous Mapping initiative.

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