

# Introduction to the GASC 2014 Issue

**Richard van Oort**

**Department of English**  
**University of Victoria**  
**Victoria, BC Canada, V8W 3W1**  
[rvanoort@uvic.ca](mailto:rvanoort@uvic.ca)

For three gorgeous days in June, against the scenic backdrop of Victoria's charming Inner Harbor, attendees at the 2014 Generative Anthropology Summer Conference explored the theme of "[Deferral, Discipline, Knowledge.](#)" The idea of *deferral* was a nod to GA's roots. Eric borrowed the idea from Derrida, whose notion of *différance* he combined with Girard's idea of mimetic desire. The result was the originary hypothesis: the idea that humanity originates when mimetic violence (Girard) is deferred by the linguistic sign (Derrida). Deferral leads to *discipline* and *knowledge*. The originary hypothesis is the basis of a discipline (generative anthropology), which explains the ethical reasons for the pursuit of knowledge. All knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is traceable to anthropological self-knowledge, knowledge of the origin of the human.

The eighth annual meeting of the Generative Anthropology Society lived up to the high standards we have come to expect from previous years. Indeed, the event exceeded a number of previous benchmarks. The program was fuller, the sessions longer, the funding more generous, and the attendance the highest since Ottawa in 2009. Presenters came from five different continents including North America, Australia, Europe, Asia, and, for the first time, Africa. Thirty percent of papers came from individuals who had not previously presented at GASC. Most gratifying of all, despite the fuller program, the intellectual caliber of the papers remained extremely high. One normally expects a few valleys and peaks over the course of three days of solid papers, but here was a seemingly endless summit. No doubt the cohesiveness of the group, which remained in one location for the duration of the conference, helped to sustain this high level of exchange. Thanks to generous funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, it was possible to hold sessions in the same hotel where attendees were housed. The Inn at Laurel Point provided ideal meeting space, with delicious food and excellent service, all in an unbeatable waterfront location. From a conference organizer's point of view, keeping people in one place was a no-brainer. But I never dreamed that this practical consideration would influence so directly the intellectual content of the meeting. More time together meant more time to talk. And more time to talk meant more intellectual momentum for the conference as a whole.

Of the many exhilarating discussions that unfolded I wish to note one in particular. Thanks to the initiative of Andrew Bartlett, who wrote to Raymond Tallis about our conference and, what is more, successfully applied for a grant from his institution to fund a second plenary speaker, we were able to stage a highlight-reel event at the mid-point of the meeting. After giving his keynote on the spread of Darwinitis and Neuromania in contemporary definitions of the human, Ray was joined by Eric at the podium, and the two engaged in a conversation about generative anthropology's vision of the human. Unusually for a speaker of his stature and reputation, Ray had spent some time familiarizing himself beforehand with generative anthropology. And Eric in turn had taken the trouble to read several of Ray's books of philosophical anthropology. The result was an incisive exchange between our two plenary speakers. It became clear that Ray and Eric agreed on many fundamental issues, including the necessity of reflecting minimally and rigorously on the distinctiveness of humanity, even if they differed in how best to model this distinctiveness. I will not rehearse the main points of their conversation here. Instead I encourage you to witness it for yourself. Video recordings of both plenary lectures are available at the [GASC 2014 website](#). To locate the conversation between Ray and Eric, click on Ray's lecture. The dialog occurs at 1:05:58 of his video.

Given the richness of the GASC 2014 program, it has not been hard to fill this issue. Six papers were ready for publication by the Fall deadline; and more will be published in the Spring.

Our first paper is by Ben Barber, one of five graduate students to deliver a paper at the meeting. Citing Derrida's critique of Levi-Strauss, Ben asks why recent theorists like Derrida have viewed language as inherently violent. Ben argues that these theorists have not truly grasped the ethical significance of aesthetic deferral. Turning his eye to the English romantics, Barber finds a similar oversight in Hazlitt's distaste for the political conservatism of Wordsworth's later poetry. He argues that Hazlitt misses the point of Wordsworth's aesthetics, which, Ben says, "pioneers a poetics that imagines the appropriation of the centre by the periphery."

Our next paper comes from *Anthropoetics* and GASC regular Ian Dennis. In a rich and provocative discussion, Ian explores the continuum of aesthetic deferral from high to popular art. Pursuing GA's thesis that market exchange defers resentment more effectively than ritual, Ian suggests that "all high art contains the seeds of its own popularization." Today the artwork exists in the context of a generalized market that encourages personal desire and, therefore, its corollary, resentment. High art is revelatory of the originary structure of desire, but ethically speaking it cannot compete with the market system, which undermines the center-periphery asymmetry assumed by high art. This breakdown is reflected in the spread of high art from center to periphery—or, to put it as Ian does, from the singular high-cultural mode to the plurality of experiences in pop culture. Ian analyses this transition in terms of a provocative typology of aesthetic feelings, attitudes, and moods.

We were fortunate to have in our company a few regulars of the Girardian conference, including two of Girard's oldest students, Andrew McKenna and Sandor Goodhart. In his fascinating discussion of Beckett's masterpiece *Waiting for Godot*, Sandor argues that despite their obvious differences, Derrida and Gans rely on a conception of time that is specific to the Western philosophical tradition. But there may be an alternative way of looking at time, one that attends more precisely to our contemporary situation in, as Sandor puts it, a "time of disaster." Sandor finds this alternative in Beckett's paradoxical play *Waiting for Godot*.

Readers of this journal will be familiar with the work of Marina Ludwigs. In her dazzling contribution to this issue, Marina examines the structure of epiphanic moments in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Observing that the novel's ending is often regarded as emotionally unsatisfying, Marina suggests that this dissatisfaction is given by the double frame with which the novel ends. The outer frame, which involves the plot of Lily Briscoe, gives us an authentic epiphany, while the inner frame, involving the plot of the Ramseys, forces the novel to closure. Taking her cue from Raoul Eshelman's notion of *performatism*, Marina argues that this complex double structure recreates the revelatory structure of the originary aesthetic sign. Woolf's epiphanic scenes reflect the complexity of the human experience of events.

I said that a full 30 percent of papers came from newcomers to the GA conference. Our next paper is by one of these newcomers. Yet Kenneth Mayers is no newcomer to GA. On the contrary, he is one of Eric's oldest students, having attended UCLA from 1984 to 1995, when he received his PhD in Comparative Literature. Indeed, it was Ken who originally encouraged Eric to begin conducting a regular seminar in generative anthropology. We are very glad to have reestablished contact with Ken and to welcome him to our conference. Like Sandor, Ken takes up the topic of Beckett and modern culture, but he reaches a quite different conclusion. Ken argues that *Waiting for Godot* is centered on the idea of waiting as *resistance*. This resistance is not merely a resistance to modernism with its aesthetic of cultural mastery. It also thematizes the condition of market society, in which relationships of domination are temporary and contingent rather than permanent. In market society, Ken concludes, resentment can be transformative and constructive rather than, as in agrarian societies, reactive and destructive.

The last paper in this issue is by Andrew McKenna, a longtime supporter of generative anthropology. In a characteristically stimulating and packed contribution, Andrew analyses the structure of irony in Voltaire's *Candide*. This irony, Andrew says, consists of two distinct stages. First, there is the knowing smile as we appreciate the humor of the passage; second, there are the tears, when (in an awkward moment of self-recognition) we see our complicity in the sacrifice of the young slave depicted by Voltaire. Andrew extends this pity for the victim beyond the colonialism of the 18th century to the global economy of the 21st. Guilt is effective only if it changes sacrificial behavior. Andrew's essay provides a caution to those

who uncritically extol the virtues of the market. In their singular pursuit of profit, Andrew says, “market exchanges are people-neutral,” but this neutrality has a serious downside, which is the neglect of an underlying anthropological truth, namely, “our ineluctable, structural, complicity in malfeasance.” As heirs of the Enlightenment, we have freed ourselves from the sacrificial beliefs of institutional religion, but we have not freed ourselves from the anthropological reality of sacrifice.

Next year, GASC returns to High Point, NC, where GA veteran Matthew Schneider will host the Society’s ninth annual meeting. The theme of the 2015 conference is “Models of the Human, Analog and Digital.” I look forward to seeing you there!