The island of New Guinea.
DISPOSSESSION AND THE ENVIRONMENT
Introduction

This is a book about some of the ways inequalities are produced, lived, and reinforced in today’s globalized world. In it I argue that there are deeply socially embedded rhetorics of representation that underlie all uneven development and that if we examine the various representational strategies we see every day, we can begin to develop a more robust understanding of the ideological work underpinning the differential economic climates that capital needs for its constant regeneration. Throughout, I attempt to show how representational strategies with regard to the social forms that have been called “nature” and “culture” are complex acts of dispossession and carefully crafted accumulation strategies as well as ideologically grounded attempts to persuade and motivate. It is a book of ethnographic essays, three of which were presented as the Leonard Hastings Schoff memorial lectures at Columbia University in the fall of 2013. The essays are based on my engagement with New Guinea, a place anthropologists have made famous and that has given anthropology some of its most enduring topics.

The island of New Guinea sits within the global region that has come to be known as “the Pacific.” The Pacific Islands cover about 10,000 square kilometers of land and the Pacific Ocean covers approximately 165,250,000 square kilometers of water, making the combined area over one-third of the earth’s surface. Even though the Pacific has risen to the
center of foreign policy agendas of Western nations today (Clinton 2011; Petri et al. 2012), historically, the area has often fallen to the bottom of most European “hierarchies of knowledge” in terms of assumed political, economic, and social importance (Teaiwa 2006) and has been continually articulated through various colonial-era frames such as smallness, remoteness, and insularity by politicians and policy makers (Hau’ofa 1994). These ideas, combined with colonial-era racial science, resulted in the geographic containers “Melanesia,” “Micronesia,” and “Polynesia”—the “dark islands,” the “small islands,” and the “many islands,” respectively (D’Urville 2003; see also Tcherkezoff 2003). The island of New Guinea is located in what is referred to as Melanesia.¹

Humans have lived on New Guinea, the second largest island in the world, which sits directly to the north of the Australian continent, and its associated smaller islands for between 30,000 and 50,000 years, and the high mountain ranges that make up the central spine of the island, called “the Highlands,” are the site of early and independent agricultural origins approximately 10,000 years ago (Bourke 2009). Although the mention of New Guinea often evokes images of a place cut off from the rest of the world, the island has a deep history of trade and connection with other areas. By the eighth century, much of the coast of Western New Guinea was enmeshed in Malay trading networks that moved bird of paradise plumes all the way to China and India.² By the twelfth century this same coast was part of the spice trade, which drew the Portuguese, Spanish, English, and Dutch to the region. By the early part of the sixteenth century various European powers were claiming to have discovered the island, with Spanish explorer Íñigo Ortíz de Retes bestowing the island with the name it is now known by in 1545. By the 1880s, as fashions in Europe began to demand more bird of paradise feathers for women’s hats, the interior of New Guinea became part of an extensive trade network in animals and animal products (Swadling 1996). The colonial period began in earnest in terms of the alienation of land, labor, and natural resources on the island when the Dutch claimed the western half of the island in 1828; between then and 1975, the Dutch, Germans, British, and Australians all held parts of the island as colonial possessions (Waiko 2007; see also Moore 2003: chap. 5).

New Guinea boasts an extraordinary diversity of animals, plants, and ecosystems that has lured scientists who wish to discover, describe, possess, and conserve them since the early nineteenth century (Frodin 2007). At 786,000 kilometers square, it is less than one-half of one percent of the earth’s surface, but it contains an estimated 10 percent of the total species
on earth. Many of these species are endemic, found only on New Guinea. Terrestrially, New Guinea has montane rain forests, sub-alpine grasslands, mangrove forests, lowland rain forests, freshwater swamp forests, savannas, grasslands, and one of the world’s last remaining tropical glaciers.

Today the island is split in half by an international border. The western half has been a settler colony for Indonesia since 1961 (Kirksey 2012). The eastern half of the island, the independent nation of Papua New Guinea, which established its sovereignty and achieved independence from Australia on September 16, 1975, is the focus of the essays in this book. Today Papua New Guinea is a parliamentary democracy with an elected national parliament and, through that parliament, a prime minister. It is a Commonwealth nation, meaning that it is part of an association of fifty-four countries that were part of the British colonial empire. The country is slightly bigger than California, with between seven and ten million residents who speak 850 different languages, making it the most linguistically diverse nation on earth. That diversity, which maps onto extraordinary social or ethnic diversity, has drawn anthropologists to the area for almost 150 years (Lederman 1998; Soukup 2010; Sillitoe 1998).

In *Imagining the Other: The Representations of the Papua New Guinea Subject*, Regis Tove Stella a literary scholar from Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, writes about colonial representations of nature and culture in what is now Papua New Guinea. He shows us that the twinning of representational practices concerned with “the native” and “the jungle” has a deep history across Oceania and that when deployed by agents of colonial power, practices intertwine to set the conditions of possibility for seeing citizens, subjects, and space. The representations of nature that Stella excavates from the colonial documents assume a world that is alluring and repulsive, romantic and dangerous; a world that is waiting to be discovered by intrepid white explorers. That world is desirable as a site for both discovery and self-discovery, yet it is nevertheless also a site where “white savagery” is prone to emerge unless measures that separate the explorer from the jungle and its natives are taken (Stella 2007:48–50). The fantasy jungle world written in colonial documents is home to savage primitives who are both childlike and overtly sexual; people who are exotic and dangerous, yet ridiculous in their unsophisticated lack of modern understandings (Stella 2007). Throughout his work Stella shows how these images structure colonial practice and the creation, and enforcement, of colonial law. He also demonstrates that these images presuppose and underpin the creation of the colonial economy and the means
MAP 0.1 Papua New Guinea.
to access it. The colonial government affords and restricts access to the economy and to other state-connected forms of support for inhabitants, written into the record through the documents Stella analyzes. He brilliantly links these representational practices to the cultural milieu of their day—the tail end of the “scientific” acceptance of ideas about classical social evolution—that nineteenth-century social theory generated from Europe and taken global that assumed that all societies moved through a particular progression of lineal stages—each after the next increasingly complex—toward “Western Culture” as a pinnacle of progress.4

The twinned image of savage nature and savage native that derives from this nineteenth-century episteme endures today in the representational practices and rhetorical strategies that surround Papua New Guinea. All of these images—what Stella, following Stuart Hall (1997), calls “representations” and what I have come to think of and call “representational rhetorics”—are grounded in a particular European-American-Australian ideology of autochthonous peoples, places, and times. Autochthonous refers to what is formed or originating in the place and time where it is assumed to still be located. I use the term “autochthonous” here and not “indigenous” because I am trying to mark the externality of this ideology and the fact that it conjoins so-called nature and so-called culture in ways that assume that indigenous peoples who do not fit within this ideology should no longer be afforded the possibility of sovereignty over their land, labor, bodies, representational practices, or futures.

What I mean by ideology is a set of both conscious and unconscious ideas that are meant to be normative, that have an internal logic tied to a particular historical genealogy, that are meant to persuade, that guide people’s actions and help them see and understand the world, and that serve as a logic and means by which people justify their actions. I also see ideologies as sets of conventions that represent the desired material relationships of those with power. Ideology blurs and makes invisible both the violence and the structural conditions that keep some people in power and others disempowered (Marx and Engels 2001:64). It does not, however, create a false understanding of the world; rather, it sets the conditions for our actual experience of and, more importantly because it is actually accessible for understanding, our narration of the world around us (Althusser 2001:108). In addition to its relationship to language and narration, ideology is made present through our material social practices (Althusser 2001:114). Finally, we constitute others as particular kinds of subjects—in part—through ideology (Althusser 2001:116).
The term “sovereignty” refers to the ability to control, and have autonomy over, one’s life in whatever manifestation the society of which a person is part articulates what the fundamental parts of “life” are. While sovereignty is often taken to mean jurisdiction, rule, power, and domination as these forces are tied to a state, nation, or governing body, following contemporary scholars of indigenous worlds, I take an expanded view of sovereignty when it comes to Papua New Guineans (Barker 2005; Mihesuah and Wilson 2004; Simpson 2014; Trask 1987, 1993, 1994; Warrior 1992). In Papua New Guinea political sovereignty and material sovereignty are deeply interwoven with the ongoing dispossession of “intellectual sovereignty” (Warrior 1994), “representational sovereignty” (Raheja 2013), and “rhetorical sovereignty” (Lyons 2000). So in what follows “sovereignty” means control over meaning, representations, the future, ideas, and the creation of social worlds and social reproduction, as well as political control and material manifestations of control. This expanded notion of sovereignty comes from the work of indigenous scholars, and I attempt to build on it.

These chapters demonstrate how representational rhetorics that are grounded in this European-American-Australian ideology of autochthonous peoples, places, and times result in the denial of multiple forms of sovereignty and are linked to material dispossession and accumulation. They show that this ideology has created the conditions of possibility for seeing and narrating and ordering the peoples of Papua New Guinea so that they seemingly cannot be thought of outside of it. Specific rhetorics are used to perpetuate ongoing racial disenfranchisement and oppression in postcolonial Papua New Guinea. These are much more pernicious and dangerous than we often imagine. They are more than just “discourse.”

Discourses, following Michel Foucault, are the material and linguistic infrastructures through which knowledge, power relations, and subjectivities are produced over time (Foucault 1975). They constitute the conditions of possibility for being, thinking, and acting, as well as the epistemological systems and processes that interpenetrate them (Foucault 1970; see also Weedon 1987:108). For Foucault, the episteme, or the accumulation of structures that lay under the production of knowledge, is grounded in a particular time and place and is unconscious and singular (Foucault 1970). In *The Order of Things* he writes, “in any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one episteme that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice” (Foucault 1970:168).
Part of my argument in this book is that we have never had an “epistemological rupture”—a moment during which the unconscious nature of the episteme at play is destroyed and new modes of knowing that create new conditions of possibility for seeing, understanding, and thinking are possible—in the epistemic worlds that surround people from Papua New Guinea and places in Papua New Guinea as they are configured by others (see Bachelard 1986 and Althusser 2001). A second part of my argument is that the deployment of these representational strategies today are rhetorical in nature, they are meant to persuade, to motivate, to influence thought and action; that they are not ever fully unconscious. Foucault argued that “truth” comes through epistemic process and that it brings about power (Foucault 1980). I argue that economic and social power brings about the “truth” that is endlessly rhetorically produced and reinforced concerning the nature and culture of Papua New Guinea and that that power is directly connected to ongoing accumulation, ongoing dispossessions, and uneven development (Said 1978; Smith 1984). Discourse is always thought to be between ideology and practice. I use the term “rhetoric” in these chapters because I am documenting a strategy in or of discourse that is talk and image and more. It is directed at bringing about a particular world; it is consciously meant to entrench and strengthen white supremacy and capitalism. Three examples of what I mean by “representational rhetorics” will make my argument clearer.

Lunch with the Prime Minister

In December 2004, Sir Michael Somare, who was at the time the prime minister of Papua New Guinea, visited my university in New York to give the commencement address at the business school’s winter graduation. I was invited to the luncheon afterward. The luncheon guests included former deans of the business school, department heads, economics faculty, Papua New Guineans working in New York and Washington, people from the Papua New Guinea mission to the United Nations, the Papua New Guinea embassy to the United States, and the prime minister’s staff. A few faculty and recent business school graduates were also thrown into the mix. As one of the only Americans there who had actually been to Papua New Guinea, I was seated at his table for lunch.

The guests at the table included a historian, an economist, several people from the Papua New Guinea department of planning, and me. During
lunch the prime minister, who is undeniably a statesman—impeccably
dressed, eloquent, gentlemanly, and seemingly genuinely interested
in everyone he meets—asked the historian, the economist, and myself
about our research, our experience at the university, and our families. He
started with me, and we had a rather long talk about environmental con-
servation in his country, the politics of Western critiques of locally gener-
ated conservation politics, and coffee production as a form of ecologically
sustainable development—all topics that I was writing about at the time.
He then moved to the historian and finally the economist. When asked
about his research, the economist steered the conversation away from
himself and toward the topics of cannibalism and crocodiles.

The economist had recently seen an episode of *The Crocodile Hunter* on
TV, and the show mentioned the island of New Guinea, cannibalism, and
the Sepik River, on the banks of which the prime minister had grown up.
Sir Michael Somare was good-natured about the line of questioning. He
“played along”—so to speak—when the economist asked him question
after question about cannibalism in New Guinea, about the “remoteness”
of the island, the “impenetrable jungles,” and if there were places where
natives had still never seen Westerners. The prime minister, throughout
maintaining his posture of dignity and respect for others, talked about
how old men from his village told stories about eating people during
times of war, about playing on the banks of the Sepik, and “wrestling
crocodiles” as a young man. He moved with alacrity between the role of
er elder statesman and architect of his country’s constitution and that of
tolerant storyteller as he listened to this man who knew nothing about his
country, a country he helped to found, establish, and build, go on and on.

Conradian Journeys

A Papua New Guinean acquaintance of mine, whom I will call
Max, delights in particular sorts of international visitors. He loves to talk
to visitors—tourists, journalists, missionaries, aid workers—who fanta-
size about his country as an exotic, magical place full of primitive Stone
Age–like savages. Max was born in Goroka, educated in missionary-run
schools, was a member of the national parliament in the 1980s, and owns
a successful coffee-related business. He is elderly, eloquent, charming,
and loves both playing golf at the Goroka Golf Club and telling people
that he is a cannibal. The scene is usually something like this:
Max is at the bar at the Aero Club, the Goroka Yacht Club, or the Bird of Paradise Hotel, and he or one of his friends has overheard some international visitor regaling someone with a story about how exotic their trip was or how they know that there are still cannibals “out there somewhere” just waiting to be found. Max slyly joins the conversation, introducing himself as “a real live cannibal.” He then spins a yarn of Conradian proportions, which usually includes warfare, sorcery, colonialism, gold mining, deep dark forests, or World War II and culminates in him declaring that he ate someone—a clan enemy, a colonial officer, a gold prospector, or a Japanese soldier.

Along the way, during the trip down the dark river of imagination, Max has relieved the rapt international visitor of South Pacific Lager for himself and all of his friends. After one particularly rousing version of this tale, told to a American journalism student visiting Papua New Guinea for the first time, I asked Max why he derives joy from what I consider to be troubling, at the very least, and racist depictions, in many senses, of Papua New Guineans. Max said, “Have you seen the movie Cannibal Tours? They want us to be primitive—right out of the Stone Age—I give them what they want, and they go home and talk about it for the rest of their lives.”

Bourgeois Books

In a 2013 piece in New York magazine, Elizabeth Wurtzel, an American journalist in her mid-forties, a Harvard College and Yale Law graduate who attended elite private schools in Manhattan as a child and developed a taste for heroin in her late twenties, which she chronicles in one of her two memoirs, writes about her “failed” life in New York City:

I never wanted to be a millionaire or a billionaire or anything at all like that, because the happiest thing would be doing what I love. Which is how it turned out, and so it goes with talented and thoughtful people who move to places like New York and L.A. and Chicago and Austin and wherever else you take your wits these days. It isn’t just creative types, also public-interest lawyers and public-intellectual academics and political thinkers—collectively, the professional class. In a city, these are the people who make the place vital and fun. They work hard but still have time to try a no reservations restaurant on the Lower East Side or check out the small boutiques in
Nolita and help interesting young designers get off to a start. Mostly, they make six-figure incomes and somehow manage. And they are happy for the privilege. But these are people who soon won’t exist anymore. Soon New York will be nothing but a metropolis of the very rich and those who serve them—and the lucky and desperate still hanging on. All of the fun jobs are disappearing. If great talent did not require infrastructure to nurture it, Norman Mailer and Martin Scorsese would as likely exist in Papua New Guinea, or, for that matter, Norway. But the arts have thrived, and great work has supported itself without the benefit of government subsidy, because this country was founded with an intellectual-property system and a free press that understood that creativity and capitalism are happy partners. (Wurtzel 2013:46)

Wurtzel recast a more pithy version of the same sentiment in her 2014 book Creatocracy: “If human genius could thrive without a system to support it, Hollywood and Silicon Valley would be located in Papua New Guinea” (Creator 2014). Both of these recent quotes seem also connected to other seemingly-off-the-cuff mentions of Papua New Guinea by Wurtzel in other publications:

The honest truth is that when two people connect—I mean really connect—it is damn near impossible to keep them apart. In spite of infinite obstacles, ultimately it will become apparent that the powers that be have conspired to bring them together, and no other outcome could be possible. I have friends who are living happily ever after (for now anyway) with people they’d met when they were married to someone else or living somewhere else or in some way completely unavailable. The long and complicated sorties of how they got together—how they kept in touch through marriages and divorces and a tour of duty in Brazil or an assignment in Papua New Guinea—are small and petty and meager compared to the largess of love. (Wurtzel 2001:75)

There are other things that other women need to do: they need to have lesbian affairs; they need to drop out of medical school and become investment bankers; they need to fly with the Air Force in Iraq or work for the Peace Corps in Papua New Guinea; they need to sleep with their brothers-in-law; they need to—heaven help us—sleep with their brothers; they need to live in New Orleans for five
months, in Krakow for three months and in Bangkok for two years. (Wurtzel 1999:393)

My economist colleague at Columbia University takes lunch with the prime minister as a cue to articulate his understanding of Papua New Guinea as a remote jungle full of cannibals where there might still be lurking men and women who had “never seen a white man” before. My friend Max, having met hundreds of young Euro-American-Australian visitors, draws on the rhetorical images that have been articulated to him over the years and mirrors them back to visitors as a way of mocking them publically. Wurtzel uses Papua New Guinea to index the opposite of all that she holds dear. It stands as the negative to her bourgeois sense of what matters in the world. Art, literature, creativity, intellectual pursuits—these are all the opposite of the negative space that is Papua New Guinea. These things are the “natural” and the “cosmopolitan” and are opposed to Papua New Guinea, which sits outside of culture and the natural order. It also indexes the opposite of the organization, infrastructure, and reasonable governance that she imagines resulted in the flourishing of the arts in places like New York, Austin, Los Angeles, and Chicago. It stands for all that is without state-sponsored order, talent, and creativity. Papua New Guinea embodies the opposite of her fantasy of humanity and human existence that she sees as the pinnacle of societal evolution: New York City in the 1990s. In the earlier quotes she simply uses it to index the furthest other—a place that is unimaginably remote.

How do these actors, these representers, all participate in the same rhetorical community where Papua New Guinea comes to index a particular set of ideas about nature and culture? It is my contention that it is not enough to be irritated by these three situations—the conceit of the economist, the naiveté of the journalist, and the bourgeois white privilege of Wurtzel—rather, we must understand what material effects these forms of rhetorical representation have in the world and how these material effects reinforce structural inequality. Papua New Guineans have complex relationships with these forms of rhetoric.

Accumulation and Dispossession

The essays in this book derive from my work as an anthropologist, my collaborations with my Papua New Guinean colleagues, my
learning from the work of other scholars, my listening in various social settings in the country, and experiences, over almost twenty years, of spending time with my Papua New Guinean friends. In all of these forms and areas, I have watched my research participants, my colleagues, my friends, and complete strangers endure multiple forms of dispossession. Many of these forms of dispossession start with the kinds of representational rhetorics that you see in the three examples above. Yet we must understand these kinds of rhetorics as the discursive beginnings of structures of dispossession.

In everyday terms, dispossession is often defined as putting people out of possession or occupancy, or taking something away from them that they own. It is also commonly used to refer specifically to taking away people’s land or homes. Embedded in that notion is a secondary aspect of the idea of “dispossession”: for something to be taken away, somebody has to do the taking. Dispossession and accumulative strategies that drive it can only be understood if we start with Karl Marx’s analyses of “primitive accumulation” or “original accumulation” in Capital and then move to Rosa Luxemburg’s work to correct Marx in The Accumulation of Capital.

Marx wanted to understand and demonstrate the process by which wealth and power came to be concentrated in the hands of a few and how this concentration of wealth and power was directly tied to the increasing misery of most other people (Marx 1975: chap. 25). The transformation of human labor power into a commodity and the privatization of property were the central elements in his analysis of this process. Part of his project was to, as we would say today, “denaturalize” the idea of “have” and “have-nots” being a natural part of social life. He argued that the forms of inequality that we perceive between people are not the result of anything natural but rather that they are historically produced.

Connected to this, Marx also wanted to denaturalize a set of assumptions about human nature that he traces back to John Locke and Adam Smith’s imaginings of the transition from precapitalist social relations to capitalist social relations. He argues that Smith saw “two sorts of people”: one set, “the diligent, intelligent and above all frugal elite,” and the other set, “lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living.” The first kind of people accumulated money and power, leaving the second kind with “nothing to sell except their own skins.” Smith, Marx contends, assumed that this “original sin” was the beginning of inequality between people, “the poverty of the great majority” and “the wealth of the few” that somehow increases “although they have long ceased to work” (Marx 1975:873).
To counter Smith’s dualism, Marx recounts a different version of history whereby “conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder” and brute force “play the greatest part . . . in the creation of laborers . . . and the process . . . that clears the way for the capitalist system” (Marx 1975:845). He calls this process “original” or “primitive” accumulation and claims that as people are dispossessed of their means of production they necessarily become poor laborers tied to the very people who dispossessed them of their lands in order to make enough money to live and reproduce their families over time (Marx 1975: chap. 26). He temporalizes this process, observing that “the so-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. It appears as primitive, because it forms the prehistoric stage of capital and of the mode of production corresponding with it” (Marx 1975:847).

As a part of his analysis of this original accumulation, Marx also attempts to trace out how means of production in precapitalist societies were transformed or “converted” into private property (Harvey 2005:128). He acknowledges that some of the early capital in the system was derived from merchant profits but, famously, contends that “the conversion of means of production accumulated under pre capitalist modes of production to capital” was the result of violent dispossessions.  

These two aspects of Marx’s work form the basis for all analysis of capitalist accumulation and dispossession since. For Marx, primitive accumulation is at its foundation “about the violent dispossession of a whole class of people from control over the means of production, at first through illegal acts, but ultimately, as in the enclosure legislation in Britain, through actions of the state” (Harvey 2005:293). This violent dispossession happens through brute force, legal and illegal acts, and the perpetuation of the ideas of freedom and liberty as they were derived from Adam Smith’s work. Marx shows that freedom and liberty are fictional ideas that are also, when framed in market-related terms, seductive ideas. David Harvey reads Marx’s focus on freedom in this way: “Laborers are free only in the double sense of being able to sell their labor power to whomsoever they chose at the same time as they have to sell that labor power in order to live because they have been freed and liberated from any and all control over the means of production” (Harvey 2005:290). Marx wants to understand and demonstrate how this kind of freedom was secured and seeks his answer by asking how labor and land became commodities.
In his discussion of the expropriation of agricultural populations and the end of feudalism in *Capital*, Marx argues that once land is taken and transformed (turned into pasture in the examples he uses) community dissolves and people are forced to move to cities in order to enter into a wage-labor system in order to support their families and reproduce society. Money becomes social power as it dissolves communities, but communities do not dissolve easily. The peasantry is dispossessed of their land through the creation of laws. Here Marx also shows the formation of a bourgeoisie that consists of several kinds of capitalist landowners, merchants, finance capitalists, and manufacturing capitalists, contending that together they “conquered the field for capitalistic agriculture, made the soil part and parcel of capital, and created for the town industries the necessary supply of a ‘free’ and outlawed proletariat” (Marx 1975:805).

The agricultural populations who do not move to cities to sell their labor become seen by the capitalists and the state, which is now part and parcel to the deployment of capitalist laws, as criminals. They are cast as outlaws and thieves if they neither work their own lands nor work in manufacturing. They are remade in social terms as aberrant, lazy, and outside of the natural order of things (Marx 1975: chap. 28). Physically, they are made unable to support themselves and reproduce society as free labor, people who can subsist by their own agricultural labor on their own lands. Food becomes a commodity, and when people cannot grow their food or trade their food for other commodities, other artisanal markets begin to disappear. At the same time all of land and nature becomes commoditized and monetized as capital comes to circulate both through nature and human bodies (Smith 1984; Harvey 2005:197). The environment and people come to be seen as having value and worth only if they are generating surplus capital for the capitalists. They are devalued if they are perceived as outside the system or on the edge of the system looking in. Yet in this moment they are also conjoined—nature and culture, perceived as outside of capital, are melded into one. This perspective sets the conditions for understanding non-European worlds for hundreds of years after industrialization.

At some point, dispossession begins to have its own logic that, after annihilating feudalism and paving the way for the development of industrial agriculture and manufacturing, results in a new social form. Laborers are no longer working for themselves, capitalists are exploiting many people at once, and land only has value as a commodity.
This expropriation is accomplished by the action of the immanent laws of capitalistic production itself, by the centralization of capital. One capitalist always kills many. Hand in hand with this centralization, or this expropriation of many capitalists by few, develop, on an ever-extending scale, the cooperative form of the labour process, the conscious technical application of science, the methodical cultivation of the soil, the transformation of the instruments of labour into instruments of labour only usable in common, the economizing of all means of production by their use as means of production of combined, socialized labour, the entanglement of all peoples in the net of the world market, and with this, the international character of the capitalistic regime. (Marx 1975:809)

In *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913), Rosa Luxemburg makes two interrelated arguments. The first addresses what she sees as a logical flaw in Marx’s analysis of expanded reproduction with regard to surplus value. She contends that Marx fails to acknowledge that capitalism needs outside sources of raw materials and outside sinks for surplus commodities in order to expand. Because of this she argues that a capitalist system cannot exist alone, or in what Michael Perelman (2000) calls a “pure system,” but rather that it can only exist in conjunction with precapitalist systems. Luxemburg’s second argument is that while capitalism emerged and flourished in connection to these precapitalist systems—indeed, that its existence is due to them—that in the end capitalist states and businesses will destroy all other systems of production. She bases these two arguments on empirical materials, both historical and contemporary, concerned with the relationship between capitalist and noncapitalist economic systems. Much of Luxemburg’s evidence comes from the relations between nation-states and colonies, places that can have areas inside and outside of capitalist relations of production simultaneously. The key to her arguments is that while the systems exist alongside each other for a period of time, capitalism, because of its need to constantly expand, will destroy all other systems. It will do this through force, power, and murder, all things that Marx highlighted, and through propaganda, something that Luxemburg brings into focus clearly only at the end of her book (Luxemburg 2003:467).

For her first argument, Luxemburg focuses on Marx’s analysis of surplus value. She acknowledges that surplus value emerges when the value produced by a worker is greater than the value of her labor power. This
value is located in the commodity and that commodity has to be sold if the surplus value is to be realized as money. Once sold, the capitalist uses that money to invest in new labor power and new means of production. For Marx, it is the money derived from surplus value that keeps capitalism flowing and growing. Surplus value allows the system to reproduce itself. Luxemburg perceives this as a closed system that ultimately will not allow for expanded reproduction.

For the system to reproduce itself, Marx argues, there must be within the system total demand for all commodities produced. That demand comes from capitalists (who need to constantly replace used-up means of production and buy extra means of production to expand, as well as goods for consumption and social reproduction), from workers (who spend their wages on consumption goods), and from nonproductive laborers like lawyers and clergy (who spend their wages on consumption goods). Marx traces all of this back to the capitalists because they pay the workers and the nonproductive labor. Everything flows from the capitalists in the form of payment for labor and flows back to the capitalists in terms of people spending their wages.

Luxemburg sees this closed system model as unable to account for the need for surplus capital, the capital that the capitalists (and others) amass over time. She maintains that amassing capital is the key to expanding the system. Initially this could mean adding more workers. When capitalists add more workers there are more commodities to be sold, more money is made, and workers compete for jobs so wages can be lowered, so there is money to be amassed. But eventually all that money has to go back into the system to keep it going. In order to sustain themselves, Luxemburg argues, capitalist systems must expand through imperialism, and she uses her discussion of imperialism as the basis for her second correction to Marx.

Luxemburg defines imperialism as “the political expression of the accumulation of capital in its competitive struggle for what remains still open of the non-capitalist environment” and claims that while imperialism prolongs capitalist expansion, it is also the source of capitalism’s demise:

Still the largest part of the world in terms of geography, this remaining field for the expansion of capital is yet insignificant as against the high level of development already attained by the productive forces of capital; witness the immense masses of capital accumulated in the old countries which seek an outlet for their surplus
product and strive to capitalise their surplus value, and the rapid change-over to capitalism of the pre-capitalist civilisations. On the international stage, then, capital must take appropriate measures. With the high development of the capitalist countries and their increasingly severe competition in acquiring non-capitalist areas, imperialism grows in lawlessness and violence, both in aggression against the non-capitalist world and in ever more serious conflicts among the competing capitalist countries. But the more violently, ruthlessly and thoroughly imperialism brings about the decline of non-capitalist civilisations, the more rapidly it cuts the very ground from under the feet of capitalist accumulation. Though imperialism is the historical method for prolonging the career of capitalism, it is also a sure means of bringing it to a swift conclusion. This is not to say that capitalist development must be actually driven to this extreme: the mere tendency towards imperialism of itself takes forms which make the final phase of capitalism a period of catastrophe. (Luxemburg 2003:446)

In the long run, capitalist and noncapitalist systems do not, and cannot, live together—Luxemburg sees noncapitalist systems as fixed, inflexible, and static and capital as relentlessly stalking the earth for the fodder for growth. That fodder is a combination of land, labor, natural resources, and new consumers. Her observation expands Marx’s idea of primitive accumulation tremendously. For Marx, accumulation was always about labor and labor alone. Land was a benefit of dispossession, but the dispossession was intended to create more labor. Luxemburg identifies other primary goals of capitalist dispossession:

Since capitalist production can develop fully only with complete access to all territories and climes, it can no more confine itself to the natural resources and productive forces of the temperate zone than it can manage with white labour alone. Capital needs other races to exploit territories where the white man cannot work. It must be able to mobilise world labour power without restriction in order to utilise all productive forces of the globe—up to the limits imposed by a system of producing surplus value. This labour power, however, is in most cases rigidly bound by the traditional pre-capitalist organisation of production. It must first be “set free” in order to be enrolled in the active army of capital. The emancipation of labour
power from primitive social conditions and its absorption by the capitalist wage system is one of the indispensable historical bases of capitalism. (Luxemburg 2003:362)

Like all teleological Marxists, Luxemburg relies on a simplistic sense of historical progression in her tracing out of how capitalist imperialism emerges: “We must distinguish three phases: the struggle of capital against natural economy, the struggle against commodity economy, and the competitive struggle of capital on the international stage for the remaining conditions of accumulation” (Luxemburg 2003:368). But instead of just seeing “natural economies” as sites for dispossession and primitive accumulation, she also perceives them as sites for the introduction of commodity economies and sites for the consumption of commodities to create surplus value. Capitalism has to dispossess to continue to grow, and it has to create consumers and the desire for commodities and set up a seeming social and political barrier between workers and rural dwellers so that politically these two sections cannot form an alliance to fight their dispossession. Workers are made to feel like their industries and interests are different from those of people living in rural places (Luxemburg 2003:369–371). She shows clearly that there always need to be new “sink” areas for capital: areas that are seen as empty or prior to capital, that can be transformed by capital investment, and that can provide flows back to the “source” areas.

Finally, Luxemburg argues that capital and capitalists can do things abroad that they could never do in Europe, which provides a new kind of flexibility that allows for things besides labor to become the focus of dispossession and for new, and extreme, forms of violence that are unbounded by law or that even work to create new laws. Abroad, capitalism can be violent. It can kill; it can do anything it wants. It is unbounded by law, it creates laws, it taxes such that people can’t say no to the system, it steals land, and it creates (through propaganda) a false history, a false world.

David Harvey argues that Marx and Luxemburg are writing about a process that can be happening anywhere at any time. What they describe is not a particular unilinear historical progression; rather, we can see their arguments about primitive accumulation as a case analysis of a more general principle. Harvey argues that to talk about it as “primitive” or “original” accumulation embeds the idea that this sort of accumulation is over and that we (and capital) have moved on. “Accumulation by
“Countertopographies”: New York–New Guinea

It may seem strange to move from Rosa Luxemburg’s brilliant analysis of how imperialism and colonization are elaborated forms of the accumulation and dispossession that Marx wrote about to New York City as a way to understand New Guinea. However, this jump allows me to connect some seemingly disparate ideas that are crucial for our understanding of accumulation and dispossession in Papua New Guinea today and dispossession as a process more broadly. Luxemburg theorized a geographic fix—what David Harvey calls a “spatial fix”—for surplus capital, and in doing so she extended Marx’s theories to explain how capitalism can seem like a closed system yet constantly pulls in new land, labor, and natural resources in order to keep itself going. Shifting the scene from turn-of-the-century theory to modern New York City also helps us understand how it can be that Luxemburg was wrong about capitalism eventually erasing all other modes of living, modes of being, and modes of production. This is important because Papua New Guinea is one of the global sites that has been used, over and over again, to show, contrary to many classic social theories that hold that the expansion of capitalism and its social forms causes the full displacement or erasure of other social forms, that other social forms endure alongside and interpenetrate through capitalist modes of being. In other words, capitalism does not necessarily erase indigenous ways of knowing, seeing, narrating, and being-in-the-world. Other social forms endure over time and often rework capital into new structures and processes based on these prior forms. Nevertheless, capitalism always needs new sites for sinking, or investing, surplus.

In order to understand dispossessions in Papua New Guinea, I take a cue from Cindi Katz’s Growing Up Global, in which she theorizes global capitalism’s avenues of dispossession as they connect to the lives of children by moving back and forth between New York City’s Harlem neighborhood and a rural village in Sudan (Katz 2004). In the book she asks, how do children learn about and make knowledge about, or understand, their environments, and how does this process change over time as communities intersect in new ways with multiple forms of capital? To answer these questions she develops what she calls a “countertopography,” a
method of reading two places alongside and against each other to discover how the processes unfolding in each place are linked and how they construct new, global realities. Katz sees children in both of her sites, one ravaged by structural adjustments and one by deindustrialization, becoming different kinds of subjects because of these global interlinked processes. Children are engaged in new modes of being because of the intersections of these global processes in their day-to-day lives, and these new modes of being are making different kinds of persons.

Katz also theorizes a counterperspective to the taken-for-granted notion of “time-space compression,” the idea that technology has elided distances across space and through time in ways that allow for a speeding up of various social, economic, and political processes (Harvey 1990). Katz sees what she calls “time-space expansion” in Sudan and Harlem. She argues that because of structural adjustments and failed development projects in Sudan and the defunding of public schools and public spaces in Harlem, people have to reach farther and farther outside of traditional terrains to continue social reproduction. People engage in expanded zones for their sociomaterial production and reproduction, and they understand that these new pressures are due to processes they associate with global centers of power. People also develop what she calls “rural cosmopolitanism” whereby their desires are produced by and articulated through categories that are derived from their knowledge that the world is big and that they are most certainly not in the center of it but that people who are have more than they do (Katz 2004:225–231). In other words, in addition to there being new terrains for social reproduction, there is a spreading of the ideological terrain that people use to understand and define themselves and through which they articulate their desires.

There are moments when the circulation of capital itself becomes reworked and when places become narrated, cast, and valued in new or different ways so that this reworking can benefit some people (Smith 1979:24). The circulation of capital, as Luxemburg noted, is key to its continued vigor. While she thought that it would eventually overtake all other systems and modes of being trying to erase new venues for its investment, the geographer Neil Smith, in his work on urban gentrification and uneven geographical development, teaches us that capital investment, and the people who accumulate based on its investment, can find “frontiers” over and over again.

In his early work and his landmark book on gentrification, *The New Urban Frontier*, Smith proposes a theory urban social change, through
processes of accumulation and dispossession, that focuses on production. Earlier theories of urban change had focused mostly on the desires of consumers, or “gentrifiers,” in understanding how and why poor urban neighborhoods came to attract wealthy investors in the 1980s. They basically argued that young people who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s developed a kind of aesthetic around both the look of their neighborhoods and the politics of suburbanization that drove them to inner cities. Theorists assumed that liberal or progressive college graduates wanted to move away from the disembodied apolitical feel of suburban America, which drove them to invest in urban areas. Smith argued that gentrification was a process that brought together an ongoing restructuring of the capitalist economy with what Henri Lefebvre had called “the production of space” (Lefebvre 1991). A key part of Smith’s argument was that production and the needs of capital investors, including both public and private investors, were driving gentrification and that the desires of consumers were actually only the social manifestation of these larger processes. He proposed a “the rent gap theory” of gentrification to round out the analysis.

The rent gap theory is as follows: In the 1960s and 1970s cities expanded outward so that capitalists could take advantage of inexpensive land on the outskirts of urban areas, land previously used in other ways—such as farmland or public natural spaces. Because of this investment outside cities, the prices of property in urban centers fell and state services tapered off so that they could be refocused on the growing suburbs. With the decline in state services, people who could move did, but people who could not move were left to the mercy of landlords who saw no reason to keep property structures healthy since the economic value of the property had gone down. Through this process, land and other property become devalued and rent becomes inexpensive (Smith means “rent” as in paying rent for an apartment and “rent” as in the cost to buy property or land). He proposes that there is a “rent gap” between the price of urban property and the potential value of the property if it were to be used in a different way (Smith 1987). When this gap became wide enough, when the difference between what something would cost, even with the amount that would be needed to redevelop it was factored into the cost, and the profit that investors assumed they could squeeze out of it after redevelopment reached a certain point, capital would once again be reinvested into urban and inner city neighborhoods. The rent gap at its apex then becomes the driving force in the economic process of gentrification. So the rent gap is, for investors, a measure of the potential value
of something versus its actual cost at a given time when they feel that the market for it is depressed enough to be at its nadir. However, the rent gap can only be achieved if the area is both materially disadvantaged and ideologically devalued.

All of this takes place where the residents of inner cities are still living. Indeed, Smith shows that in New York City, the focus of much of his work, while global economic processes are being played out in their apartments, bodegas, and city parks, citizens are struggling to make a living and to reproduce their families and ways of life. Social reproduction continues in the face of gentrification, but social reproduction is slowly transformed as the urban residents become the modern-day version of Marx’s “agricultural populations.” Investors and gentrifiers come to see these residents as something to be overcome in so-called urban renewal. They are cast as outlaws and thieves and socially made as “outside of the natural order of things.” What this means is that in connection to material dispossession—when poor urban residents are priced out of their homes as gentrification begins—there is a kind of representational and rhetorical dispossession that must be in place if investors are to accumulate at the rate they desire after they have begun their reinvestment into urban spaces.

One way that gentrifiers and the investors who pave their way into urban areas cast residents who were living there prior to them as “outside the natural order” is through the language of the “frontier” and discourses of “discovery” (Smith 1996). In New York City, gentrifiers and the investors who wish to benefit from the rent gap rely on and perpetuate a form of frontier mythmaking. Newspapers use phrases like “urban homesteaders” and cast these “pioneers” as having a kind of settler mentality—adventurous, brave, and willing to traverse areas and go where they assume no white people have gone before (Smith 1992). Inner cities in these accounts are both dramatic and dangerous, sites where young white settlers can make an iconoclastic life. Smith argues, “The frontier myth makes the new city explicable in terms of old ideologies. Insofar as gentrification obliterates working-class communities, displaces poor households and converts whole neighborhoods into bourgeois enclaves, the frontier ideology rationalizes social differentiation and exclusion as natural and inevitable” (Smith 1992). He argues that in New York City in the 1980s, the myth, and the ideology embedded within it, were discursively underpinned by the real estate industry, the culture industry, and the state, in the form of the city’s housing policy and agencies.
“The frontier” in this ideology is a place where “savagery” meets “civilization” (Reid and Smith 1993). In New York City these roles were cast with working-class people of color, mostly African American and Latino/Latina households, as the savages and middle-class whites with their desires for loft apartments and coffee bars as the force of civilization (see Reid and Smith 1993:195). At the same time, developers and realtors are portrayed as “urban cowboys”—rugged individuals, driven in pursuit of civic betterment—[who] tame and reclaim the dilapidated communities of the downtown urban frontier” (Reid and Smith 1993:193). In writing about gentrification in Harlem, Monique M. Taylor shows us that this mythmaking is also connected to discussions of existing neighborhoods and persons as dirty, pathological, and deviant and portrayals of new residents as stable, healthy, and pushing toward renaissance (Taylor 2002). The myth works to both rationalize assumed social differences, which are seen as natural or immutable, and cast some people as living in a kind of prior state and needing to be brought into a civilized future. This ideology also rests on the kind of temporal fantasy that I discussed above: some people are seen as living with cosmopolitan modernity while others exist in some sort of premodern state of nature. Yet these two temporalities are seen as existing at the same time, a chronotopic fantasy (Bakhtin 1981). As such, this ideology posits certain ideas about human agency (Lipset 2011:21). Povinelli (2011) argues that the communities with which she works are ideologically located in a precolonial past, stuck, in the eyes of the state and others, between that assumed past and an assumed modern future.

The rhetoric and ideology here is the nonmaterial form of dispossession. Through it we can see that the material and economic are always underpinned and presupposed by the ideological, discursive, and semiotic (see Povinelli 2011). While both Marx and Luxembourg understand that how people are cast during the process of dispossession is a part of the process, I argue that the process of accumulation and dispossession in Papua New Guinea today rests on the discursive, semiotic, and visual production of both Papua New Guinea and Papua New Guineans as outside of the natural order of things—with the assumption that the natural order of things is a kind of linear progression fantasy in which everyone, globally, has come to live, or should have come to live, in urban, cosmopolitan ways. The reason that this discussion of gentrification is useful for us is because it clearly connects discursive dispossession as articulated through the rhetorics of the frontier with material dispossession.
This ongoing nature of accumulation and dispossession can clearly be seen in new work on settler colonialism in North America. In both *Mohawk Interruptus* by Audra Simpson (2014) and *Red Skin, White Masks* by Glen Sean Coulthard (2014), we clearly see that the structures emplaced by colonial invasion and settler colonialism work to continually dispossess indigenous peoples. Both authors read the violent transformation of social and economic forms that existed prior to colonization, in what is now Canada, into capitalist forms as an ongoing act of accumulation and dispossession and insist on seeing colonial invasion as continuous and ever present. Invasion continues through current-day policies, development projects, and juridical process, as well as practices around “recognition” and so-called accommodation of cultural difference, which always fail to address the structural inequality that underpins everything in a settler society. Simpson’s work pushes farther and theorizes practices of “refusal,” focusing ethnographically on Kahnawà:ke Mohawk refusal of American and Canadian citizenship as a form of sovereignty claim. In this analysis of refusal she also argues that anthropologists, and others, in their assumption that colonialism is over, fail to see it as an unrelenting form of dispossession.

This dispossession is, of course, connected to race and the deeply ingrained European, American, and Australian racist ideologies about Pacific Islanders in general and Melanesians in particular (Douglas and Ballard 2008; Clancy-Smith and Gouda 1998; Dixon 1995; Jahoda 1999). In finely grained rhetorics and practices these racist ideologies are embodied on a daily basis for people from Papua New Guinea. These racist legacies are lived and, in various ways, feed into the structural inequality that both creates and limits indigenous modes of being and social reproduction.

**Dispossessions Where There Are No Possessions?**

Dispossession, broadly conceived, is a taking, a theft of sovereignty over lands and bodies. When the thieves use the stolen land and bodies (usually as labor) to make money for themselves, you have accumulation by dispossession. Because people in Papua New Guinea are granted ownership of their traditional lands by their national constitution, they trouble many materialist analyses of accumulation by dispossession as it relates to land. Additionally, since Melanesians create
themselves and others through transactional practices that do not rely fully on Enlightenment notions of the individual as the seat of rights and responsibilities and on philosophical propositions about humans possessing a individual self, Papua New Guinea troubles contemporary philosophical approaches to dispossession and subjectivity.

Much of the literature about possessions in Melanesian societies starts from the position that personhood in the region cannot be theorized in the same way that it is theorized elsewhere. This discussion of personhood is almost always read into and grafted onto discussions about both material possessions and social change. The European concept of the individual as an ontologically privileged category differs from how it has been construed historically in many Melanesian societies, as most scholarly work on the region observes (Strathern 1988). This has resulted in the view “that Western and Melanesian images of personhood are fully incommensurable because the West constructs individuals while the societies of Melanesia construct dividuals or relational persons” (LiPuma 2000:131). Here, “relational persons” means people that see and are seen as selves only in and of relations with a plurality others; persons are like mosaics, made up of elements that are performed and elicited in transactions with others and not essential or inherent to their “self” or others (M. Strathern 1988). And these “composite beings” are constituted through
previous and current “elicitations and exchanges” (Mosko 2008:215). They are produced by both social exchanges and material exchanges—exchanges that are easily recognized by outsiders, such as gifts of land, and exchanges less easily recognized by outsiders, the gift of your wife's mother’s labor in the food she grows and feeds you with, for example. Across Melanesia, it is also assumed that most exchanges are meant to be reciprocated. Indeed, the failure to reciprocate is one of the many topics that comes up when Melanesians discuss the difference between their societies and those of their interlocutors.¹⁴

One critique of this strand of scholarship has been that it essentializes both Melanesian and Western ontology; another holds that it fails to adequately address questions about social change (Biersack 1991; Macintyre 1995; Mosko 2008; LiPuma 2000). There are two crucial correctives to the critiques. The first corrective derives from an attempt to understand how dividual and individual processes of personhood are related. Its aim is to “enable exploitation of the dynamic potentialities of partibility and elicitive exchange as change, and [take] due account of processes analogous to dividuality in introduced dimensions of presumably individalist Western sociality” (Mosko 2010:16). This approach takes seriously that people are “composites of prior interpersonal transactions” and that someone’s “composition at any one time indicates his/her potential for future action” (Mosko 2010:17). The second corrective derives from arguments about the historical adoption of particular elements and objects from European culture into Melanesian social lives and practices (Sahlins 1985:23–42, 2005:23–42). It postulates that people in Melanesia acquire objects of all sorts (both “traditional” “introduced” objects) for social reasons and that these objects are put to use in ways that are socially meaningful in relation to already existing ontologies and epistemologies. The incorporation of externally made objects—and it is often commodities that are discussed—does not make systems of world-making less Melanesian; rather, the systems of worlding make objects less Western (M. Strathern 1988:81; Sahlins 2005:29). Indeed, the value of objects comes to be seen through their movement in exchange rather than through quantitative commodity values. Additionally, in many Melanesian societies, for most members, accumulation historically was seen as so antithetical to entrenched demands of reciprocity that to accumulate, or desire to do so, marked you as aberrant (LiPuma 2000:146). This strand of thought takes seriously that historically most material possessions in Melanesia moved from person to person and rarely accumulated with a single
person unless that person was a traditional political leader. In that case, the leader would redistribute those objects at an appropriate time or during a ceremony or event.

All of these social and material processes are part of social reproduction. In the chapters that follow we will see how social reproduction, following Katz but drawing on the embedded and ethnographic nature of people’s processes of making self and society outlined above, has been reconfigured and altered through ongoing processes of accumulation and dispossession.5

What emerges with processes of dispossession, both original and continuing ones, is not simply a new set of economic formations or structures. Nor is it just a new set of images that go along with the commodity economy. What emerges is a “new Symbolic order” and, connected to it, new modes of being, living, making, and knowing the world (see Morris 2016). This process is constant and relentless. What the gentrification literature show us is that there are nonmaterial aspects that always go along with dispossession—the taking of the ability to have community and define community, the marking of people as criminal just for living, and the shaving off of opportunities for social reproduction and representations of and becomings of selves or persons. The ideology and language of “the frontier” and the material aspects of the rent-gap process of creating value and creating a “new” sink for capital that is meant to create accumulation opportunities for some while dispossession for others is what connects Papua New Guinea and gentrifying New York City in this countertopography.

Anthropology and Papua New Guinea

Historically the discipline of anthropology has flourished in Melanesia. Papua New Guinea has been particularly important in the development of anthropological theory since 1922 and the publication of Bronislaw Malinowski’s Argonauts of the Western Pacific, a book that ushered the discipline into an era of long-term field research as a way to understand both the structures of human societies and the structures of human thought, or consciousness, as they relate to particular phenomena, as well as the relationship between a society’s workings and the day-to-day lives of individuals.6 Indeed, in terms of anthropological “hierarchies of knowledge” Papua New Guinea was, until relatively recently, paramount. In fact, many of the contemporary subfields within
anthropology owe their theoretical and methodological origins to work done in Papua New Guinea. These subfields include economic anthropology, psychological anthropology, the anthropology of religion, political anthropology, the anthropology of the body, the anthropology of gender, the anthropology of violence and war, and environmental anthropology (Soukup 2010; see also Foster 1999 and Knauft 1999). Additionally, some of the “hot topics” in the discipline also find some of their origin-building theory in research done in Papua New Guinea—for example, the au courant ontological turn; the examination of the relationship between gifts, commodities, and their circulation; and questions about subjectivity and personhood, reflexivity and cultural analysis, or translation.

Yet today much of the discipline sees the anthropology of Melanesia in general and of Papua New Guinea in particular as a slightly embarrassing link to an anachronistic kind of anthropology. Seventeen years ago, while writing about the future of “cultural areas” and building on Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s worry that anthropology’s reproduction of ideas about its “others” as somehow “primitive” forced anthropology into a “savage slot”—an imaginary invention central to Europe’s thinking about the rest of the world as “other,” non-Western, and perhaps more importantly, a locus for a fixation that allowed the West to claim itself as normal and civilized as opposed to this “other” (Trouillot 1991). Rena Lederman warned of the danger of forcing the anthropology of Melanesia and those who do it into a “savage slot” within the hierarchies in the discipline (Lederman 1998:436). This slotting of the anthropology of Melanesia and Papua New Guinea has come to pass.

This disciplinary sense of Papua New Guinea and the anthropology done there derives from four strands of causality. First, anthropologists are part of larger popular-cultural fields, even when they should know better than to be seduced by discursive regimes that have been fully discounted in their discipline. Papua New Guinea has become the ultimate pop-culture metonymic device for a larger set of propositions about time and space that we see throughout Western thought. These propositions are that some people live in a kind of state-of-nature, pristine cultural past and some in a modern, cosmopolitan present (Clifford 1997). This sense that there is a prior state of humanity still “out there” somewhere makes people who assume that they are part of cosmopolitan humanity and who feel guilty for all manner of modern sins—things like overconsuming even when they know the global ecological effects of this sort of behavior—feel better about their structural positions of power and
privilege (West 2012: chaps. 1 and 7). Anthropologists fall prey to this belief, just like tourists, aid workers, natural scientists, and oil company employees; all groups of people that I write about in the essays to follow.

Second, since the early 1970s anthropology has been forced to grapple with the colonial legacy of the profession (Asad 1973; Said 1978). One manifestation of this was a rejection of work that was perceived as derived from village-based research questions and research that was assumed to focus on a “culture” rather than on a group of people’s connections to larger processes like imperialism, transnationalism, globalization, or neoliberalization. Scholars like Talal Asad argued that village-based work somehow fully embodied colonial power structures that “made the object of anthropological study accessible and safe—because of its sustained physical proximity between the observing European and the living non-European became a practical possibility. It made possible the kinds of human intimacy on which anthropology fieldwork is based, but ensured that the intimacy should be one-sided and provisional” (Asad 1973:17). Ethnography from Papua New Guinea was “slotted,” or assumed to be located, within the former domain—myopically focused work that was about culture rather than connection and that was derived, more than other anthropological encounters, from unequal power structures. Additionally, so many of the classic texts within anthropology are about Papua New Guinea—including historically important works by Marcel Mauss, Bronislaw Malinowski, Margaret Mead, and Gregory Bateson, as well as efforts of scholars such as Marilyn Strathern and Roy Wagner—work that derived theory from long-term complex understandings of small-scale cultural articulations. Because such works were hugely influential in the late 1980s and early 1990s, anthropologists trained in those decades assumed that such “foundations” or “history of anthropology” represented the be-all, end-all of Melanesian ethnography. There was no new, theoretically engaged, work being done in contemporary Melanesia.

Third, much of the ethnography from Papua New Guinea, and Melanesia more generally, even when it is connecting human subjectivities to local sociohistoric propositions and processes, as well as to externally generated processes and circumstances, forces readers to attend to theories derived from local ontological postulates. By this I mean that the ethnography from this region was and is challenging for readers who are unwilling to suspend, even for a second, their own knowledge-making structures. This is because propositions about what “is” in the world and what entities do and do not have power in the world are often quite different for people from
Papua New Guinea than for people from, say, the United States or Europe. And while we are currently within a fruitful and much discussed “ontological turn” within some quarters of the discipline, ethnographies of Papua New Guinea that forced readers from the 1980s to early 2000s to think theoretically from the ethnographic material were slotted as continuing a primitivizing tradition that people wished to move away from.

Finally, there is a subset of current scholarship about Melanesia that works to calcify the place and its people within a much older and much less engaged and dynamic literature about the area. This work is usually based on limited field research, for example, monographs that are based on dissertation research without the scholar having returned over a number of years to the place of work. Or it is grounded in a limited, very old, area literature. When anthropologists see a paper about Papua New Guinea in a flagship journal that grounds the argument in literature from the 1970s and 1980s, with one or two references to more contemporary research in the country, it works to solidify the thinking that there has been a calcification of theoretical contribution from the area.

My evidence for this savage slotted having taken place is hundreds of conversations over the past twenty years with anthropologists who are strangers, colleagues, and friends. For example, when I met a brilliant and lovely colleague many years ago, he said, “Wow. New Guinea, you are a real anthropologist.” Just this past year, upon my return from three months of field research in Papua New Guinea, another colleague asked, “Did you eat anybody this summer?” The question, although asked in a joking manner, referred to the endless associations between Papua New Guinea and cannibalism. I have had to make the argument for why Papua New Guinea matters over and over in a wide range of professional settings. It is never enough to say that the country matters because the lives of the millions of people who live there matter. In today’s anthropology people’s lives seem only to matter if they are assumed to teach us something about global processes and assemblages or allow us to theorize something larger than human life, and for various reasons the discipline has come to see Papua New Guinea as not fitting this form.

In the essays in this book, which do not assume prior knowledge of either anthropology or Papua New Guinea to engage with them, I insist that Papua New Guinea matters because the lives of the people there matter in and of themselves. Yet these essays are also meant to show that the processes and assemblages we see in Papua New Guinea today do have something to teach us about larger theoretical or conceptual questions.
within contemporary anthropology. Those questions revolve around the creation of inequality through contemporary processes of accumulation and dispossession, questions that have arisen, over and over again, during my anthropological research in Papua New Guinea.

Dispossession and the Ancestors

The first European scholar to undertake what we would think of today as “anthropological research” in what is now Papua New Guinea was the Russian ethnographer Nicholas Miklouho-Maclay, who arrived on the northeastern coast of New Guinea in 1871 (Tumarkin 1993). The second European researcher who focused on anthropological elements of social life in the area was Otto Finsch, a German ornithologist who arrived in 1879. Both of these scholars added to the ethnographic accounts that were being collected by European missionaries around the same time period (Langmore 1989; Moore 2003). While they were not as important in the formation of contemporary anthropology as Malinowski was, they were crucial in the formation of the ideologies that I examine in this book.

Nicholas Miklouho-Maclay was a famous progressive public figure in Russia. He opposed the colonization of the Pacific Islands and argued against it in public forums, like newspapers and lectures, and through political action in eastern New Guinea. He also pushed back against already emerging stereotypes about New Guinea (Tumarkin 1993:35). He opposed sweeping generalizations about “native brutality,” slavery, and the slave trade, all the while maintaining a focus on that stepladder theory of human societal development that would come to be known as “unilinear cultural evolution” or “classical social evolution.”

Otto Finsch made several trips to New Guinea during which he became convinced that there was great wealth waiting for Germans if they were willing to create colonies there. Indeed, he provided several wealthy and influential bankers with the information they needed to convince Chancellor Otto von Bismarck to establish colonies across the Pacific, and on New Guinea in particular. Finsch used his previous knowledge of the place and its people to locate friendly harbors and acquire land, and the information he provided from his trips in the 1880s created the conditions that Germany needed to begin its period of economic and social dispossession on the main island and in what is now known as the “Bismarck Archipelago.” He also provided the Germans, and the New
Guinea Germany Company, with social data that was meant to make dealing with the inhabitants of the island easier. The capital of the German colony was named “Finschhafen” in his honor. In addition to serving as a handmaiden of colonization through gathering ethnographic information, Finsch also collected ethnographic objects, thousands and thousands of them (Buschmann 2009; Penny 2002; Weiss 2012).

These two scholars exemplify two of the forms of accumulation and dispossession that anthropology and anthropologists must account for if we do not wish to replicate the sins of our forbears. The first seems to represent a benign process of accumulation that results in ongoing dispossession. The second, at first glance, appears more pernicious, with a clear link between the scholar’s work and material processes of imperialism, which were always about dispossession and accumulation. Finsch advocated directly for accumulation by dispossession, and that is horrible, yet the “benign” version is equally unsettling.

In the case of Miklouho-Maclay, the theory of societal evolution to which he was became the lens through which indigenous people were ordered, understood, theorized, and written about by scholars for the bulk of the nineteenth century and for part of the twentieth century. Even after it fell out of favor with anthropologists, this idea there was a progressive evolution of culture from the simple to the complex, from the savage to the civilized, became the backbone for the “commonsense” understanding of difference in Europe, the United States, and Australia (see T. Anderson 2006a, 2006b; Kuklick 2008). Indeed they are the underlying episteme for the European-American-Australian ideology of autochthonous peoples, places, and times. They allow for and reinforce all of the ideologies of the frontier that further both gentrification and dispossession.

These anthropologically elaborated theories can be traced to the Enlightenment and philosophers like G. W. F. Hegel and political economists like Adam Smith. The language of these theorists flowed into early anthropology, and the discipline took categories used by Europeans to explain how people made a living (hunting and gathering, pastoralism and nomadism, horticulture, agriculture, commerce) and ordered them into hierarchies of progress, each generation of early anthropology making the theory more and more elaborate. Even as these theories became seen as obsolete in anthropology and related fields, they held strong in popular ideology. They had so captured the conditions of possibility for seeing others and had so perfectly allowed for capitalist disposessions that they could not be thought out of (Mirzoeff 2011; Poole 2005).
We still see these representational rhetorics at work today. We see them in the way that the *New York Times* reports about life in the so-called developing world. We see them in the kinds of “development” projects foisted on people all over the world by European and American organizations. They form, today, the ideological locating mechanism that many regular people, nonanthropologists, turn to when they encounter difference. The representational practices I examine in the following pages—among surfers, oil company employees and executives, economists, journalists, and biologists—are all grounded in the history of this set of anthropologically elaborated theories.

How do we ensure that anthropology does not set the stage for dispossession? I recently read a truly brilliant ethnography. It was beautifully written, and I came away from it understanding the ontological and epistemological links between the social and ecological worlds of the people portrayed in it both historically and contemporarily. In it, an indigenous vision of the world and the interrelation of space, time, and experience emerged, yet the ethnography was framed entirely by the works of European theorists of space and place and time, such as Edward Casey, Johannes Fabian, Anthony Giddens, and Martin Heidegger.

What drives both our anthropological arguments today and our production of useful analytic abstractions? Do we, as a discipline, draw theory out of our evidence, or do we only read our evidence through theory produced in other disciplines and at other times? Posing these questions is not a call for a return to an atheoretical anthropology of the past. Rather, it is a serious call to ask ourselves what the politics are of always reading our empirical materials, which are often gathered in places far from the natal homes of European social theory and philosophy, through an increasingly standardized set of analytic lenses. We need to ask about how this standardized set gets produced and validated within the discipline and who doesn’t get cited. And do we want to live in a social world and reproduce that social world if it is only conceptually grounded in European, or Western, or Northern Hemisphere social theory?

This brings us to the question of what kinds of worlds we are documenting and reproducing. Some anthropologists would argue that the European phenomenologist philosophers are key to understanding contemporary questions about space and place because of the extraordinary penetration of Western capitalist forms and Western forms of governmentality into the non-Western worlds. This is precisely the question taken up by many anthropologists when they ask about the endurance of
local forms in the face of global flows. In Decolonizing Methodology, Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that indigenous peoples have been oppressed by Western social theory (Tuhiwai Smith 1999:28). However, she does not advocate atheoretical research or writing. Rather, she sees the reading of and understanding of Euro-American social theory as a crucial part of decolonizing research methods and writing, but not the end point. For her, the development of theory both by indigenous scholars and by all scholars based on indigenous epistemologies and ontologies is the only path for a truly decolonized profession. She advocates the interweaving of multiple theoretical traditions in ways that do justice to the complexity of people’s global lives. Similarly, Diaz and Kauanui (2001) have also advocated for an ethnography of the Pacific that takes seriously indigenous philosophical traditions and ideologies and also excavates the natures of ongoing dispossession. More recently, a scholarly collective has begun to articulate what an anthropology done by indigenous scholars of the Pacific brings to the field today (Tengan et al. 2010).

I’ve tried to follow what Tuhiwai Smith advocates in this book and elsewhere. The global economic system that dominates all our lives of comes to us from Europe and has been theorized by European scholars for a long time, so Western critiques of this system cannot be entirely disregarded. At the same time, indigenous people I conduct research with and the Papua New Guineans that I work with in other capacities hold and develop equally valid theories about this same system and how it intersects with their lives as well as with my life. Additionally, following Michael Jackson, I’ve tried not to “escape into . . . sympathetic identifications, or [even] political actions that reduce the other to a means for . . . demonstrating what a compassionate person one is, or [for] changing the world” (Jackson 2005:152–153). I do not tell the stories in the book to show you that they bother me but rather to demonstrate the experiences and events that I have taken part in, watched, and discussed. Hayder Al-Mohammad uses the notion of ethnographic being-with to encapsulate this kind of practice: that particular forms of narration might change power relations (Al-Mohammad 2010).

Plan of the Book

This book looks at a few areas where we can see how global forces effect dispossession in Papua New Guinea. Chapter 1 focuses on
tourism, chapter 2 on international development and resource extraction-related development, chapter 3 on environmental conservation. Chapter 4 turns things around, so to speak, to focus on indigenous theories of possession, accumulation, dispossession, and sovereignty. The afterword concerns where some of my thinking on uneven development originated.

Throughout the book I return to several themes again and again. First, I look at who employs representational rhetorics to produce images of others in a way that results in dispossession. In chapter 1, surf-related tourists, publications, and businesses all work to make others using specific descriptions of nature, culture, savagery, discovery, and gender. All of this is wrapped up in a set of ideas about temporality. In the chapters 2 and 3 I build on this to show how bankers, the employees of big international conservation organizations, the employees of resource extraction companies, economists, and ecologists all use descriptions exactly like the ones outlined in the previous chapter. Throughout, I tag moments where we can see how these representational strategies draw on ideas first put out there by anthropologists. Concomitant with the images that produce others, I show how all of these actors also work to make selves through their representational rhetorics of others. I show how they accumulate status and senses of their own subjectivity through representations of the subjectivities of others.

Second, I show how these descriptions of nature, culture, savagery, discovery, and gender are used to dispossess. And I think through dispossession both in terms of material dispossession that is happening now and the potential dispossessions of material objects and access as well as disposessions of sovereignty. I take sovereignty to be multifaceted with aspects connected to power or authority, the ability to self-govern (in the state-related political sense as well as in the sense of rights to make decisions about self, land, family and future), as freedom from domination and control, and as the ability to assert autonomy through daily practice and action (see Simpson 2014).

Finally, I return to the theme of “discovery” repeatedly, for each instance of it I describe is an act of dispossession. Each chapter has a host of actors who in their “discovery” of something or someone in Papua New Guinea creates the conditions of possibility for the kinds of processes described in the rent gap theory. Rhetorics of discovery are never innocent and never apolitical. Make no mistake, the theme of discovery grows tiresome. (Think, as you read this book, about how tiresome it is for Papua New Guineans to be repeatedly “discovered.”)
Although each chapter is written to stand alone, they do build on each other. Chapter 1 lays the ground for the representational rhetorics discussed throughout. Chapter 2 connects those rhetorics to the dispossession of both representational sovereignty and material sovereignty today and in the future. Chapter 3 connects rhetorics and disposessions to a deeper history of the ideology of discovery in Papua New Guinea and introduces some of the indigenous ways of speaking about and thinking about others. In chapter 4, I demonstrate how some people in Papua New Guinea theorize inequality, possession, dispossession, accumulation, and sovereignty. I conclude that chapter with a thought experiment intended to push back against some of the newish theoretical thinking in contemporary cultural anthropology.