# ANNUAL REVIEWS

# Dreams, Visions, and Worldmaking: Envisioning Anthropology Through Dreamscapes

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## Keywords

## Abstract

What does it mean to envision or dream a world into existence? Dreams and visions are often deeply personal and private experiences, but they also open up social spaces for worldmaking. From Australian Aboriginal "Dreamtime" to the ethnographic dreams of anthropologists and their research partners, many dreams and visions are entangled with the historical and analytical trajectories of anthropology. I set out in this article to stretch further the anthropological imagination about the kinds of dreams and visions that may emerge from any dreamscape. To this end, I show that the anthropology of dreams and visions is built on more than the interpenetration of dreaming and waking life, metaphysical questions, problems of communication and interpretation, active or passive dreaming, the powerful idioms that dreams afford for collective visions, or nightmares and metaphorical dreaming. Myriad dreams and visions also unfold as what I call cosmological visions that shape anthropology and vice versa.

## INTRODUCTION: FROM DREAMSCAPES TO WORLDMAKING

Every world, in a sense, is the product of dreaming. New visions of the world often start out as dreamscapes that are—or resemble—something seen in dreams. A dreamscape is a space of epistemological (ways of knowing), ontological (ways of being), and ethical deliberation that opens up to activities of self-cultivation, emergent sociability, and, ultimately, the worldmaking act of creating new worlds or shaping familiar ones. Twenty-five years ago, I learned during my fieldwork among the Buryats of northeast Mongolia and China that dreams and visions may be harnessed to accomplish the worldmaking acts of deflecting a rival shaman's curse, attacks from a shaman's spirit helpers, or gossip with curse-like effects (Swancutt 2012b). Almost a decade later, when conducting fieldwork among the Nuosu, a Tibeto-Burman group of Southwest China, I found that the visions of priests (*bimo* ꀘꂾ), ethnohistorians, anthropologists, and ordinary people can reshape important elements of local ecology, cosmology, and ways of engaging with the world at large (Swancutt 2023). But while much creativity lies behind the ways in which Buryats and Nuosu turn their dreams and visions into worldmaking acts, this move is not unique to anyone, anywhere.

Anthropologists have long paired the study of dreams and visions with worldmaking in ways that have steered the discipline in some of its most productive and imaginative directions [Hallowell 1942, 1960; Tedlock 1992a (1982)]. This pairing has remained pivotal to anthropological thinking even though, like shamanism and other themes with a complex interdisciplinary history (Atkinson 1992, Grant 2021), dreams and visions temporarily fell out of anthropological fashion not long after the study of them had begun [Tedlock 1992c (1987)]. Many anthropologists rightly reacted against the early social evolutionary works that, echoing Freud [2010 (1955)], erroneously attributed "the same crooked logic" to dreams, visions, magic, and religion [Tylor 1977 (1871), p. 122; see also Frazer 1983 (1922); Malinowski 2002 (1922), 2003 (1927)]. But after the anthropological interest in dreams and visions regained popularity in the 1980s, it underwent something of a renaissance (Stewart 2004). More recent anthropological studies have approached dreams and visions not only as experiences that may enable "a certain way of being alive" (Ingold 2013, p. 741) to the "ineffable" (Rubenstein 2012, p. 40) but also as worldmaking acts that go far beyond the human.

The anthropological notion of "Dreamtime" or "Dreaming" among Aborigines in the Western Australian Desert, for example, was drawn from their ancestral "Law" of a landscape that has been—and is still being—dreamed and traveled into existence by spirits, ancestors, and living people (Poirier 2005). These worldmaking dreams and travels continue to shape Aboriginal people and their landscapes, to the extent that many Aboriginal children are conceived in dreams and considered native to the "country" in which their mothers dreamed of their conception (Poirier 2005, pp. 67–68; see also Tamisari 1998). Similarly, the Mayan world is populated with spirits, giants, dwarves, and other tellurian deities that are credited not only with bringing the physical features of a sacred geography into existence but also with calling on shamans in dreams to take up their craft [Tedlock 1992e, pp. 454–55; see also Tedlock 1992d (1987)]. Acts of dreaming, then, may bring landscapes, dreamscapes, and whole cosmologies into existence. Sometimes an act of dreaming is approached "para-ethnographically" by the anthropologist's research partners (Marcus 2000, Holmes & Marcus 2008), who select—and even curate—the dreams that anthropologists study as a way of steering the anthropological knowledge about them in a particular direction (Mittermaier 2015). I have often noticed my Nuosu research partners engaging with me in ways that could fulfill their own ethnographic dreams of acquiring fame while contributing in "hyper-reflexive" ways to the production of anthropological knowledge (Swancutt & Mazard 2016). Given the impact that dreaming may have on anthropology, the question arises: How is the anthropological landscape—and its many dreamscapes—being shaped by dreams, visions, and worldmaking today?

I throw light on this question here by showing that dreams and visions take culturally specific, historically contingent, and socially situated forms, which often make them both deeply indeterminate and conducive to collective acts of worldmaking. I do this work through an ethnographic discussion of how (*a*) dreaming and waking interpenetrate, so that (*b*) dreaming motivates metaphysical questions, which (*c*) cause dreamers and visionaries to face the interrelated problems of communication and interpretation that sometimes become the province of experts. My discussion points to the anthropological challenge of knowing (*d*) whether someone is the active agent or passive recipient of a dream or vision, especially as (*e*) dreams can offer powerful idioms for collective visions while (*f*) nightmares and metaphorical modes of dreaming may inspire both fear and desire—which are akin but not reducible to ideology. Each of these points leads me to what I call (*g*) the "cosmological visions" used to address the existential threats facing humanity today—such as climate change—that are increasingly shaping the present intellectual history of the anthropology of dreams (Swancutt 2023). Ultimately, I show that anthropologists have found renewed interest in dreams, visions, and dreamscapes not only because they may represent the perils of escapist fantasy or the nightmare of waking reality, but because they can take the form of cosmological visions that are perhaps the only thing that can remake a livable world.

## DREAMING AND WAKING INTERPENETRATE

Many dreams and visions blur the boundaries between day and night, waking and sleeping, mythic and current time, human and nonhuman, private and public, the body and what lies beyond it, and so on (Tedlock 1999, Handelman 2005, Schnepel 2005). Dreaming and waking life may even interpenetrate in ways that make them—much like the totemic and animistic ontologies of Siberia—"shade into each other rather than appear as two opposites of one dichotomy" (Willerslev & Ulturgasheva 2012, p. 50). It is therefore not always easy to tell where dreaming and waking life start or end. Afro-Cuban practitioners of *espiritismo* in Havana, for example, draw on the "porosity of the body" to transmit to their clients the extraordinary knowledge they obtain in dreams, visions, and dream visions (Espírito Santo 2009, p. 6; see also Espírito Santo 2015, 2016). A similar dynamic unfolds in Iceland when ghosts of the dead visit expectant couples in dreams to request that an unborn child is named after them (Heijnen 2010, 2013). These visits do more than entangle the living with the dead; they shape names, identities, and relationships between kin, friends, and sometimes former lovers, all in a high-latitude setting where the near-constant low light unsettles distinctions between night, day, dreaming, and waking (Heijnen 2005). Children's names are routinely dreamed into being among the Ese Eja of the Peruvian Amazon, which highlights the interconnectivity of "the self not only with the body but also with all species" so that humans, animals, and other beings experience "the overlay between subjective dream worlds and public objective waking worlds rather than their 'opposition'" (Peluso 2004, p. 107).

This overlay—and overlap—between dreaming and waking has long informed anthropological, cognitive, and sleep laboratory–based work on dreams and visions [Tedlock 1992c (1987)]. Many anthropological studies continue to be drawn into the interdisciplinary research on dreaming in ways that propel new findings on culture and consciousness (Mageo & Sheriff 2021); memory and creativity (Glaskin 2005, 2011); cultural models and identity (Mageo 2010, 2022); typologies of dream categories (Lohmann 2000, 2010); hallucinations and sensory overload (Luhrmann 2011); the presentation of precultural or prototypical concepts in dreams (Stewart 1997; Willerslev 2004b, 2007); the relationship between the senses, mimesis, embodiment, and cognition (Mitchell 2015); the "dream alliance" between art, anthropology, and consciousness (Santiago & Santiago 2023); and even the cross-disciplinary approach to an anthropology of the night (Schnepel & Ben-Ari 2005, Galinier et al. 2010). These studies often start from the premise that certain elements of human biology and cognition may in fact be culturally determined. Yet

dreaming and waking are also tangled up in ways that require looking beyond the nature-culture divide to the metaphysical questions that dreams elicit.

## DREAMS AND VISIONS MOTIVATE METAPHYSICAL QUESTIONS

One good example of how dreams raise metaphysical questions is Islamic dream incubation, or *istikhara*, in which people prepare to receive dreams that can guide their decisions in waking life (Aydar 2009). While dreamers often hope to receive a "true dream" inspired by God (Edgar 2006), many receive only "worldly dream messages" from their *nafs*, the earthly spirit that dwells in the body, or "false dream messages" from Satan or *jinn* (Edgar 2009, 2011; Edgar & Henig 2010; Amanullah 2009). Practitioners of *istikhara* therefore tend to reflect carefully on whether their dreams are true, worldly, or false—and on how to avoid making decisions that would clash with God's own worldmaking acts. Their reflections point to the important question in Islam of how to act ethically in a world of God's making, where, as one *fundi*, or reproducer and interpreter of the central texts of Islam allowed, the world is in fact written into existence by God such that "when the pen (*stylo* or *kalam*) of God is used up, so will the world be" (Lambek 1990, p. 26). However, the effort to live and dream in accordance with God's worldmaking is not specific to *istikhara*. Many Muslims spontaneously receive dreams, visions, and dream visions that "come from a metaphysical Elsewhere" inhabited by angels, saints, and God (Mittermaier 2012a, p. 249). Devotees of Egyptian shaykhs, for example, may pool their knowledge from a variety of dreams to become closer to saints and uncover the most ethical way to live (Mittermaier 2011). Egyptians who discuss the invisible armies appearing in their dreams of war may do more than prophetically communicate the side that God will make victorious; they may "reposition worldly events within a metaphysical framework and rupture linear temporalities" between the otherworldly realm and the human world (Mittermaier 2012b, p. 398). Dreams that come from this metaphysical realm tend to be valued even when their provenance is challenged by Islamic courts "ruling the time of revelation is over and that no ordinary human can communicate across this divide" (Telle 2016, p. 91).

Sometimes the interpenetration of dreaming and waking life leads to "ontological blurring," an even deeper form of indeterminacy that calls into question what can or cannot be known about the world (Kohn 2007). When the Upper Amazonian Runa fail to interpret the dreams of sleeping dogs, their failed augury leads them to the unsettling question of whether they could ever access "the intentions, goals, and desires of other selves," let alone of their own selves (Kohn 2007, p. 7). In contrast, the Rarámuri of northern Mexico commonly dream about and anticipate their futures but accept in a matter-of-fact way that no dream can fully predict how their lives will unfold [Merrill 1992 (1987)]. Both Runa and Rarámuri dreaming make the person's soul (or multiple souls) leave the body during sleep to move about the world and engage with other, and often nonhuman, beings. This kind of soul travel can lead to dangerous moments in which Runa or Rarámuri dreamers find it difficult to distinguish between their own souls and the souls of other beings. Confusion about whose soul is whose arises in various ethnographic contexts, such as that of the Siberian Yukaghir, whose hunters may unwittingly adopt the perspectives of other nonhuman beings—and fail to recover their own perspectives—if they cannot identify who (or what) they are when dreaming (Willerslev 2004a, pp. 634–35). Perhaps less dangerous, but equally revealing, are cases where the identities of the dreamer and the nonhuman beings met in dreams are thrown into doubt. As one Berens River Ojibwe boy of Manitoba recounted, a dream visitor that he met in a dream originally appeared in human form but then danced until both he and the boy had taken on the form of golden eagles—at which point the boy realized that his visitor was in fact neither human nor animal, but the spirit "'owner' of this species of bird" (Hallowell 1992, p. 89).

A similar sort of ontological blurring is often attributed to the Chinese Daoist philosopher, Zhuangzi, who once wondered when awakening from a dream whether he was a person dreaming of being a butterfly or vice versa (Li 1999, Cheng 2014). This ultimate question of being underpins the dreams and visions of many would-be shamans or priests, who, as anthropologists and historians of religion have long shown, may experience illnesses in which the spirits call them to take up their craft (Eliade 1964, Lewis 1971, Atkinson 1989, Humphrey & Onon 1996, Buyandelger 2013). *Kaminchu* priestesses of Okinawa, for example, may be unsure when summoned by a *kami-sama* deity whether they are having a dream or a vision—and only later realize that they received a "sign" to accept their vocation (Sered 1997, pp. 415, 420). Sometimes dreams, visions, signs, and omens give people sight of the world's mysterious features in ways that mirror their metaphysics back at them (Poirier 2003, Telle 2009, Louw 2010). Certain Siberian Eveny have been, on a metaphorical level, "suffocated by omens" (Vitebsky 2005, p. 297) that "tantalisingly reflected the uncertainties of waking life by omitting a vital piece of the puzzle" about it (Vitebsky 2005, p. 298). Many Buryat Mongols also "have omens sleeping at the back of their minds, and what awakens them is not the fortuitous anomalies of nature as such, but these only insofar as they connect with the anxieties of real people" who are concerned about the future (Humphrey 1976, p. 35). Experiencing dreams, visions, and signs as mysterious happenings may therefore encourage people to interpret them in ways that give fresh insights into the world.

## PROBLEMS OF COMMUNICATION AND INTERPRETATION

Despite their metaphysical and mysterious qualities, dreams and visions are often communicated and interpreted through material things, from the corporeality of shamans, priests, and ordinary people to the substance of ritual props, accoutrements, clothing, and offerings [Kendall 2008, 2016 (1996); Opas 2016]. When put into material form, dreams and visions can show—much like museum exhibits, photographs, or film—that "visualization is a bringing to life" of bodily experience, emotions, and things long dead, such as ancestors or shamanic spirits (Feuchtwang 2011, p. 73). Take, for example, the "costumed, embodied performance" and paintings of Korean shamans, which show clients how the gods and spirits appear in the shaman's dreams and visions (Kendall & Yang 2015, p. 158; see also Kendall 2021). The Korean shaman's divining stones may also "reveal the interior world of things as a waking dream" (Kim 2015, p. 1). Something similar is at work in Buryat Mongol shamanic ceremonies, where the shaman's body, clothing, and implements—as well as the oil lamps that light the spirits' feast on the offering table—communicate the spirits' moods, sentiments, politicking, dreams, and visions (Swancutt 2008, 2012b). Among Darhad Mongols, the shaman's costume and implements even operate as "talismans of thought" that make the spirit world visible (Pedersen 2007).

But while dreams, visions, and the regalia of religious specialists may illuminate the spirit world, they may also obscure it in ways that raise problems of communication and interpretation (Strathern 1989). I witnessed problems of this sort in 2007 when living in the home of my first Nuosu fieldwork host, the priest I call Fijy, who lost his father and eldest brother shortly before I arrived in Southwest China. Fijy had recently returned to his home village for a period of bereavement leave from the ethnological institution where he and his colleagues spent long hours translating Nuosu priestly scriptures into Chinese. At home, Fijy received visits from the ghost of his father and eldest brother in dreams, who advised him on how to handle a dispute with his boss at work (Swancutt 2012a, p. S110, see also p. S112). Some of his dreams featured giant-sized Nuosu script that flashed before his eyes and overwhelmed him like the migraine headaches he received when working with an old, blurry, and flickering computer screen. Months passed in which grief complicated his efforts to interpret and communicate these dreams. Eventually, Fijy received

a dream visitation from his father and eldest brother that settled the date for their postmortuary rituals, which would stabilize their transformation into priestly spirit helpers. After these rituals were held, Fijy received another dream visitation from his father that confirmed the dispute with his boss would soon be resolved. Looking more relaxed than I had ever seen him, he interpreted this dream in an easy-going manner, saying that he would return imminently to the ethnological institute. From then on, Fijy would be supported, particularly during rituals, by the spirit of his father who would gather protectively at his back with his other spirit helpers, move with them up to his shoulders, and keep rising until hovering over his head as he chanted (Swancutt 2022b, pp. 129–30).

Nevertheless, these dream visitations did not prevent Fijy from receiving visions in the future that raised new problems of communication and interpretation. Just two years later, Fijy was involved in a traffic accident when driving the ethnological institute's van, which was packed with priestly scriptures (Swancutt 2022a, pp. 52–53). Since Nuosu scriptures are usually filled with spirit helpers that take their purpose from the nature of the scripture itself—whether that is to perform an exorcism, blessing, astrological prediction, or something else—different kinds of scriptures tend to be kept apart. But Fijy and his colleagues loaded the van indiscriminately with scriptures as they were tired from a night of heavy drinking. Some hours into their drive, the spirit helpers in these scriptures found themselves at cross-purposes and started to fight. Being a priest, Fijy was sensitive to the fighting, which caused the vision of a black cloud to suddenly appear before his eyes. For a moment, this vision took up all his attention and caused him to collide with a bicyclist, who was badly injured. Although Fijy was held responsible for the accident by the traffic authorities, his colleagues vouched that he had been overwhelmed by the numerous spirit helpers fighting in the van. These different takes on Fijy's accident point to the anthropological challenge of identifying whether someone is in charge not only of their own actions, but of their dreams and visions.

## ACTIVE AGENT OR PASSIVE RECIPIENT?

Stimulants, including alcohol and tobacco, can make dreams or visions into an active or passive experience. This is especially true in Amazonia or anywhere that plant-based drugs are a vital ingredient of dreams, visions, and shamanic practice, even if they do not have a hallucinogenic role (Harner 1973, Dobkin de Rios & Rumrrill 2008, Labate & Cavnar 2014, Petersen et al. 2022). Some plant-based drugs are "palliative," as among the Shuar of the Ecuadorian Amazon, who seek to receive "plant-granted visions" from spirits that may reveal the future and help people "to succeed in a world of deception" (Rubenstein 2012, p. 40). Many Shuar shamans and ordinary people—including women and children—are both the passive recipients of plant-granted visions and the active agents who choose when (if ever) to share them. Yet Shuar tend to share plant-granted visions only after the events they predicted have passed, which raises suspicions about whether they were substantively real or not. Some Shuar use this indeterminacy to their advantage, by leaving others to guess just how much they know.

An altogether different balance is struck between active agency and the passive receipt of dreams among the Parakanã of southeastern Amazonia, whose shamans use ordinary tobacco to engage in "the only shamanic ability recognized [which] is that of dreaming" (Fausto & Rodgers 1999, p. 939). Parakanã dreaming enables the shaman's double to meet with nonkin that take various forms, including other humans, animals, and natural or cultural objects. Each of these beings is treated as a "pet," a "magic-prey," or "a domesticated enemy, one who remains under the dreamer's control but surpasses him in shamanic science [. . . and therefore resembles] the shaman's familiar spirits in other Amazonian groups" (Fausto & Rodgers 1999, p. 940). The boundaries between Parakanã shamans and their pets are revealingly blurred both within and outside of dreams—to the extent that the pets, rather than the shamans, are credited with accomplishing shamanic cures.

This ontological blurring is especially palpable in each song that the Parakanã shaman acquires through dreams, which is a "wild pet" that gets absorbed into the shaman's body, dreams, and even other songs and pets (Fausto & Rodgers 1999, p. 940). Seen in this light, Parakanã shamans are the active agents of the dreams they induce with tobacco and the passive recipients of the shamanic powers they source to their pets.

Songs received in dreams from the ancestors, mythic creators, and immortals may also lead to ontological blurring among the Xavante of central Brazil, whose elders often stage a community-wide "dream performance" that enacts their dreams to ensure "the Xavante would continue as the Xavante forever" (Graham 1995, p. 2). During these performances—where Xavante are both the passive recipients of an elder's dream and the active agents who give it performative life—the past and present collide so that "the performers would *be* the immortals themselves" (Graham 1995, p. 3, emphasis in original; see also Graham 1994). Xavante, though, take this a step further in their cultural outreach programs, which present "outsiders" with dream performances or modified excerpts from them (Graham 2005, p. 625). While outsiders do not enact the dream performances and probably interpret them against many of their own expectations about the Amazon, they are drawn passively into Xavante visions of cultural continuity, to which it is hoped they will give their active support. These cultural outreach performances unfold as worldmaking acts that appear to unsettle at least some of the ontological distinctions that Xavante ordinarily draw between themselves and non-Xavante.

However, it is lucid dreams and visions—which people set out to steer during the moments between sleeping and waking—that uniquely blur the boundaries between active and passive dreaming (Stewart 2002). Lucid dreaming is often an acquired skill that puts the onus on the dreamer to shape the content of a dreamscape. The Yanesha of Peruvian Amazonia, for example, may learn to guide their free soul, which detaches itself from the body during sleep, through dreams that resolve difficult personal relationships with the deceased (Santos-Granero 2003, pp. 190–92). Some anthropologists and other scholars may also learn to manage their lucid dreams while doing an ethnography of dreaming. Barbara Tedlock and her husband, the ethnopoeticist Dennis Tedlock, learned how to "complete" their dreams under the mentorship of a Quiché Maya daykeeper who prepared them for a ritual initiation (Tedlock 1981, pp. 324–29), whereas Tanya Luhrmann received "a hypnopompic vision" while awakening from a dream after learning the witch's craft in London's New Age community [Luhrmann 1994 (1989), p. 348; see also Tremlett 2008]. Dreams such as the latter are often the subject matter of what Goulet & Miller (2007) call an "extraordinary anthropology" that illuminates the dreamscapes of anthropologists and their research partners (see also Goulet 1993). But while lucid dreaming may be learned in settings that are conducive to it, it is not necessarily a skill that anyone can lift out of context in the manner that "Native American and Southeast Asian techniques of nightmare control have been appropriated, reformulated and marketed by New Age entrepreneurs as a means of personal empowerment" (Santos-Granero 2003, p. 180). Like dreams and visions, dreaming techniques are shaped ontologically, cosmologically, and ethically by the specific world(s) in which they arise. Dreaming techniques therefore take their power from culturally specific, historically contingent, and socially situated experiences, which are not easy to reproduce or simulate.

## A POWERFUL IDIOM FOR COLLECTIVE VISIONS

Occasionally a dream—or even a series of dreams—becomes a powerful idiom for a new collective vision of the world (Curley 1983, Balzani 2010). This happened during the 1930s in Koronos, a village on the Greek island of Naxos, where the dreams, visions, and prophecies of twelve-year-old schoolchildren fueled millenarian movements among their parents (Stewart 2012). The children experienced "an outbreak of dreaming" after one of them received dream visions in which the

Panagía (the Virgin Mary) revealed where her wonder-working icon could be found (Stewart 2003, p. 490). Almost a century earlier, this icon had been revealed in the dream of a nun and then unearthed from a mountainside near Koronos that became a pilgrimage site. But later, the icon was stolen and lost. So when the child who found it brought it to Koronos in religious procession, this act underscored the holiness of the pilgrimage site and spurred other children to record their dreams and visions of finding a second icon of St. Anne—the mother of the Panagía. Many adults in Koronos accepted the children's dreams and visions as prophetic. They dug for the second icon, which was never found but propelled a collective vision that they could rejuvenate their once-lucrative emery-mining business (itself built on digging for valuable materials) and the status of their village as an important Christian pilgrimage site filled with icons, archaeological treasures of antiquity, and other buried treasures.

Outbreaks of visions are by no means uncommon. In the early 2000s, after two girls saw apparitions of the Virgin Mary in a meadow called Dzhublyk in Transcarpathian Ukraine, many others started to see Marian apparitions, other holy figures, signs, and miracles there (Halemba 2015). Dzhublyk soon became a place where locals gathered, where the girls were interviewed, and where a divine liturgy was celebrated. Building on the attention that Marian apparitions have historically attracted worldwide, people in the area erected chapels, cloisters, a refectory, a hostel, and a new church "that should rival world-famous basilicas in size" and make Dzhublyk a popular destination for pilgrims (Halemba 2017, p. 49). The supporters of this collective vision put aside the fact that the bishops of the local Greek Catholic eparchy refused to acknowledge the apparitions. They chose instead to present Dzhublyk as a key Catholic destination where miraculous visions had appeared—a destination that might eventually be "seen as being legitimated through a religious center (the Vatican) that is located beyond the immediate locality" (Halemba 2017, p. 55).

Grand collective visions such as this show that the imagination is not only a social fact but an essential feature of dreaming and worldmaking. Because everyone has an "imagination," everyone can envision something "imaginary" that has a substantive reality of its own and is not reduceable to the "fantasy" of psychoanalytic theory (Mittermaier 2011, p. 3; see also Rohrer & Thompson 2023). The imagination shapes and is shaped by everything from "ethno-fiction" (Augé 1999) to predictive dreams that "start and stop like a video" (Hoskins 2015, p. 190) to the "dreamscapes" that "are visited as real places in a universe" or the "dreamlands [that] are even more refined to match the imagination than the physical earth perceived in waking life" (Lohmann 2003, p. ix). This infinite versatility of the imagination enables people to perceive deities, gods, spirits, saints, and their material manifestations. Many New Age practitioners, then, imaginatively draw spirits into the making of their identity, religiosity, political subjectivity, and "reality" itself (Rountree 2011, 2015). Some attend professional training courses on how to access shamanic dreamscapes filled with "Power Animals acting as Spirit Helpers" or on how to facilitate a "mystical experience of the unity between the individual and the Cosmos" (Lindquist 1997, p. 108). Here, the imagination is used to steer personal encounters with spirits, which are part of the New Age collective vision that the world is filled with both immanent spirits and imaginative potential.

In contrast, many Nepali shamans harness spirits, deities, and their imaginations to shape the dreams and worldmaking experiences of their patients. Nepali shamans often use the geographic imagery they see in their own dreams of a patient moving through the mountainous landscape to facilitate healing, which "is a multidimensional process involving a combination of imaginative techniques and therapeutic strategies" (Desjarlais 1989, p. 296). As they narrate their magical flights across the landscape to their patients, Nepali shamans encourage patients to envision each of their ailing organs or limbs as a dreamscape filled with the geographic imagery recounted to them. Certain dreamscape images "leapfrog into the imagination and so engage the listener not through any threaded storytelling but through a random and roundabout slideshow of

perceptions: a rock, a cave, a thoroughfare" that leads the patient along the path to being healed (Desjarlais 1992, pp. 213–14). Patients are considered healed if they feel and dream well after the ceremony. The shaman and the patient unleash a metaphoric imagery that underscores both their shared vision of overcoming illnesses and the collective Nepali vision of what makes healing successful.

## NIGHTMARES AND METAPHORICAL DREAMING

Up to this point, I have chiefly discussed dreams grounded in actual experience, of which nightmares—which often instill terror during sleep—are a type (Stewart 2002). Nightmares are so feared by the Pehuenche in southern Chile that they avoid prescription sleep drugs that might lead to the "ontological disorder" of not being able to awake in time to escape a fatal attack from spirits (Bonelli 2012). However, nightmares and other bad dreams also take metaphorical forms that stimulate both fear and desire, which may be closely related to ideology but cannot be reduced to it. Many undocumented 1.5-generation Latino immigrants in the United States, for example, live out their waking lives in ways that resemble the terror of "awakening to a nightmare" (Gonzales & Chavez 2012, p. 262). Latino immigrants often learn when coming of age that the dream lives they envisioned since childhood require documents that they cannot produce. Prevented from obtaining driving licenses, applying for university scholarships, seeking employment, enrolling in social security, and enabling other practical matters, these young immigrants have no other choice than to watch their lives stagnate as their classmates move ahead. These nightmares are politicized, racialized, ethnicized, and nationalized, including through the debates surrounding the DREAM Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act), which was introduced to the US Congress as a legislative proposal in 2001 but has yet to pass.

Any "freedom" that is experienced in dreams, then, depends on whether the dreamer's aspirations have been "decoupled" from the responsibility of carrying them out (Swancutt 2016). This is especially the case where a dream life involves bringing one's own dreams, and potentially those of others, to fruition (Kirtsoglou 2010, Sheriff 2017, Wang 2021). Shrinking opportunities often cut short dreams for the future, whether in Brazil's "racial democracy," which many experience only "as a dream of how things ought to be" (Sheriff 2001, p. 4), or in the "dream projects" of India's special economic zones that are built on the "past hopes and failures of industrialisation" (Cross 2014, p. 2), or in the "renegade dreams" of gang members in Chicago's inner-city neighborhoods that "are grounded in injury and seek to refigure the pain experienced through addiction and disease into newfound aspirations or a radical reorientation to the world" (Ralph 2014, p. 163), or among mainland Chinese university students whose "Hong Kong Dream" of making a fortune as a "free self" in a big international city is unsettled by the politics of their "mainlander" identity (Xu 2015, p. 15).

Nightmares, dreams, and visions can take on various metaphorical forms—from a "data visualization" to a "dream world"—that unfold as worldmaking acts. The data visualizations that anti-mask groups uploaded to US social media sites during the COVID-19 pandemic mimicked expert scientific data, which were meant to convince readers that the crisis had ended (Lee et al. 2021). These visualizations unsettled the distinction between "information" and "disinformation" while propounding a single collective vision of what was happening in society and the world at large. In contrast, the tourist guidebook titled *A Dream World—Shambala, Gannan*, edited by the Tibetan author Gongbao Nanjie (2006), has invited readers to contribute their own multiple visions to the "shangrilazation" of the Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Gansu province, China (Vasantkumar 2014, p. 55). This guidebook asks readers to imaginatively envision and even name the locations that they visit in Gannan so that they might "bring new destinations onto the map of international tourism" and cocreate them as "scenic spots in formation" (Vasantkumar

2014, p. 61). Guidebooks such as this do more than capture the imagination; they point to the irreducibly unique ways in which people may experience the world and its many dreamscapes.

## CONCLUSION: COSMOLOGICAL VISIONS AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Beyond these many modes of dreaming lie the cosmological visions now shaping the present intellectual history of the anthropology of dreams. Cosmological visions are first and foremost worldmaking visions. Unlike a "cosmovision," which is a "worldview" or a "particular way of understanding the universe [. . . which] implies that social life is somehow confined to what goes on in the mind," a cosmological vision is "creative, experimental, and often based on a 'trial-and-error' approach that tests out new ways of being alive to the world" (Swancutt 2023, p. 3). Many cosmological visions lead to "cosmological proliferation," or new ways of envisioning and experiencing a cosmology (Wang 2017). By way of illustration, let me offer another vignette from my Nuosu ethnography that features the priest, Fijy, and a local official who introduced a cosmological vision to protect the forests and ecology of the Ninglang Yi Autonomous County of Yunnan province, China (Swancutt 2023). This official built his vision on the Nuosu view that certain mountains are inhabited by a land spirit that should not be disturbed and that is represented during a sacrifice by a specific tree or stone on the mountain where it resides. He then commissioned Fijy to hold sacrifices in popular sites for logging that did not have any recognized land spirits. However, many loggers responded with a counter vision based on the Nuosu animistic principle that the tree chosen to represent the land spirit during a sacrifice could stand for all the other trees in the spirit's territory. They experimented with this counter vision by cutting down a few trees at a time until deeming it safe to cut down every tree except for the one that had represented the land spirit during a sacrifice. One of my long-term Nuosu colleagues later interpreted this counter vision anthropologically, as an example of Marilyn Strathern's (1992) logic of "parts and wholes" in which one thing can stand for many (Swancutt 2023, p. 10). While this counter vision was no doubt destructive, it reinforced the important Nuosu sense of having Indigenous autonomy over their forests, which have since been recovering as they turn to other visions for improving their life opportunities.

Cosmological visions, then, may transform both the here and now and the future. Across Oceania, cosmological visions have been pivotal to many worldmaking movements. Visions of the Second Coming have underpinned charismatic Christian movements in which the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, in concert with the Holy Spirit, "ceased to wait for the whites to change their world and began to transform it themselves"—notably "through visions, dreams, and experiences of possession, as they made fundamental changes in the ways they thought about and lived their lives" (Robbins 1997, p. 10; see also Robbins 2003). Some visionary and charismatic worldmaking movements have been amplified by the "omniscient powers of modern technology," including cameras, televisions, and videos that bring the surveillant powers "of a Christian god" together "with the gaze of the dead" (Lattas 2006, p. 15). Technologies of power and technologies of the self also have shaped Pentecostalist dreams and visions, as among the Lelet of central New Ireland, who chose to "embrace frameworks that impose radically different ways of being in the world than those they previously held" (Eves 2011, p. 758). Once accepted, nearly every cosmological vision leads to further cosmological visions, which has important implications for the anthropology of dreams, visions, and worldmaking.

Anthropology is arguably a cosmological vision and a worldmaking project in its own right, which has been built on ethnographic "examples and exemplars" that have melded together the visions of scholars and their research partners (Højer & Bandak 2015, p. 8). These visions have contributed not only to the proliferation of anthropology but also to the proliferation of dreaming (and even ethnographic dreaming) among the many anthropologists and research partners who

have coproduced the discipline (Restrepo & Escobar 2005, Nyamnjoh 2012, Wang 2017, Chua & Mathur 2018). Anthropologists have ultimately found renewed interest in dreams, visions, and dreamscapes because these can take the form of cosmological visions that address the existential threats facing humanity today, from climate change to the pressures on Indigenous livelihoods. Unique to cosmological visions is their penchant for stretching the conceptual horizons of what can be dreamed into existence, whether on earth or in outer space (Battaglia 2005, 2012; Valentine 2016; Olson 2018; Espírito Santo & Vergara 2020; Parkhurst & Jeevendrampillai 2020; Espírito Santo 2023). Above all, cosmological visions are perhaps the only thing that can remake a livable world.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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