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## **Creativity and Innovation: Anthropological Perspectives**

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As Stuart McLean notes ([2009, 213](#)), “everyone, it seems, is talking about creativity these days.” As we continue to grapple with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us marvel at the extensive improvisation and innovation we have called up recently. Indeed, billions of people have had to abruptly change their ways of working, learning, teaching, healing, shopping, and interacting with one another. Creativity has been a chief principal for guiding many pandemic responses—medically, physically, and socially. But even before the pandemic emerged, a capacity for creativity and innovation was seen as the means to success on several fronts. Entrepreneurs and artists—especially those who produce popular culture or social media content—are referred to as “creatives,” as the adjective has been transformed into a noun. These “creatives” include media personalities, often living in special communal houses to intensify their production of original “content.” In globalized commodity markets, many perceive a constant need for new and different items and services to sell and buy. Businesses and organizations tout their ability to innovate, to come up with big ideas and put them in to practice. Others seek to harness creativity to meet social ends, to help other people in their lives, and solve problems. Given these demands, educators feel pressured to produce creative thinkers and innovative doers. A spate of books aimed at general audiences claim to have discovered the underpinning of economic and social success in creativity of some sort or another. People are encouraged to experiment, think outside the box, and celebrate “the outsiders’ advantage” in solving life’s complex problems. Above all, creativity and innovation offer the means by which we can bring about change across a wide range of social and cultural domains.

Anthropologists have long studied creativity and innovation, and they cogently remind us that things are “always” changing. Neither our physical nor social world is static and truly fixed; as the anthropologist Tim Ingold has noted, we humans are always working things out as we go along (see Ingold and Hallam 2007). Just catalog the myriad of ways we adjusted in almost all

facets of our lives recently. Across millennia, some change has been relatively unconscious, the result of inexact replication or the almost constant processes of subtle adaptation or modification required when living in the “real” world. But much change is, in fact, more conscious, the result of creativity and innovation responding to various environmental, economic, political, social, and technological challenges or perhaps from some deeply personal desire to produce a new or novel thing. It is this latter form of purposeful and directed creativity that seems so much in demand today, including as a guide to navigating the COVID-19 era.

In this essay, we adopt McLean’s (2009, 215) very broad definition of creativity as “the bringing forth of new material, linguistic, or conceptual formations or the transformation of existing ones.” If creativity involves coming up with new ideas, its sibling practice is innovation, the more pragmatic action of bringing those ideas to fruition. The articles in this collection show us how these sibling processes are eminently social, occurring in a range of economic, political, and historical contexts.

We also include a discussion of tradition here; in fact, this is where we begin our exploration of creativity and innovation. As anthropologists, we feel bound to rebut the all too common notion that non-Western, non-industrial peoples and cultures are somehow frozen in time, lacking significant creativity and or even a capacity for innovation. This notion also underlies the pernicious notion that non-Western peoples who don’t have writing are “people without history,” because so much of our Western notion of history is based on sequences of “creation”—innovation and change. Archaeology, of course, in studying change over time forcefully refutes these shibboleths. Even in the absence of crises such as COVID-19, people are always experimenting, innovating, improvising, even as they continue practices appropriate for existing conditions. Indeed, as Ann Stahl (2015) points out, archaeological studies of innovation in past societies are particularly illuminating because they allow us to see improvisations and innovations that “stick.”

In this issue of *Open Anthropology*, we consider several fundamental questions about creativity from an anthropological perspective. How does creativity relate to tradition? Where does creativity come from? Who creates and under what circumstances is creativity encouraged or restrained? Are there particular contexts that foster or inhibit creativity and innovation? And finally, how can creativity be taught or learned? If creativity is an imperative in human physical and cultural survival, how can we best nurture this “specifically human mode of engagement with the world” (McLean 2009, 214)? While many fields of study have tackled these questions, anthropology has the distinctive advantage of approaching them from a holistic perspective, considering biological, social, economic, and ritual factors in their studies of people constantly adapting—through creativity and innovation—to the totality of their social and natural environments.

### **How does creativity relate to tradition?**

If people are always improvising, innovating, and adjusting, creativity is not the opposite—let alone the nemesis—of “tradition.” While some changes innovated during COVID-19 represent new practices developed to thwart or cope with the novel disease, many others emerged as improvisations and experiments intended to keep our lives as “normal” as possible, including going to work or school, eating food prepared by our favorite restaurants, or maintaining our visits with friends and family. Nelson Graburn (2000), in pondering “What is Tradition?” suggests that even in the European world, “a consciousness of tradition arose primarily only in those historical situations where people were aware of change. Tradition was the name given to those cultural features which, in situations of change, were to be continued to be handed on, thought about, preserved and not lost” (p. 6). Graburn notes that traditions themselves are continually being created as new practices are invested with meaning and authority. In other words, tradition is itself the product of creativity and innovation. He writes, “the reservoir of tradition is not static. It grows through activity and attention to maintenance, it fills up with the creation and practice of traditions. It does not know whether the traditions are old, modified or new, but that they are traditions, that they are strong and that they are the strength of the people” (p. 10). Thus, we see that maintaining tradition actually requires an element of improvisation and innovation precisely because real world circumstances are fluid—tradition is carrying on and adjusting in the face of this fluidity.

This idea that the maintenance of tradition requires creativity and innovation resonates particularly strongly in museum exhibits. Kristy Feldhousen (2006) reviews the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage’s online exhibition “Creativity and Resistance: Maroon Cultures in the Americas” and echoes the point made by Graburn and others that creativity is a key part of tradition. In the case of Maroon cultures, their “creative expressions of spirituality, art, music, and dance” blend elements of African, Native American, and European cultures into forms that are “not simply passed down through the generations directly in their original forms, but are constantly changing over time” (p. 65). Maroons harnessed creativity as a form of resistance and survival as they sought to endure alongside and outside the colonial and plantation systems from which they and their forebearers escaped.

Similarly, in reviewing “Across Borders: Beadwork in Iroquois Life,” Morgan Perkins (2004) emphasizes that Iroquois beadwork is a “living tradition” whose changing forms reflect the changes that have taken place in Iroquois culture for centuries. The exhibit demonstrates how Iroquois beadworkers adapted new materials and styles to “traditional” objects and created new and innovative forms for trade and sale first as souvenirs and more recently as works of “fine art.” Importantly, the Iroquois consider newer and more innovative forms of beadwork to be as fundamentally “authentic” as are older objects. Beadworkers today develop “distinctive styles that remain within the historic traditions. Aesthetic choices, such as the choice of bead colors and patterns, combine with individual technical skills to create evolving and distinctive styles that balance cultural and individual forms” (p. 597).

The exhibit “Creativity is our Tradition” at the Institute of American Indian Arts Museum (IAIAM), launched in the early 1990s, showcased the work of Native American students of the

institute, focusing on innovation and change in Indian art in the second half of the twentieth century. Bill Mercer (1993) points out that creative processes drew from “traditional” Native American cultures and Anglo-American genres to produce works that reflect “their [Native Americans’] society just as much as art produced by historic and prehistoric counterparts was a reflection of their own social contexts” (p. 80). As did Maroon and Iroquois artists, the artists displayed in the IAIAM exhibit view innovation and creativity as key to their survival. In her review of the same exhibit, Margot Blum Schevill (1993) quotes artist, Dan Namingha, whose works are featured in museums across the globe today, as saying, “If there is value to my work, it is that I am helping my heritage to survive” (p. 1076). These authors do not present creativity and innovation in opposition to tradition or cultural heritage, but rather as essential components of them.

### **Where does creativity come from?**

Perhaps the most fundamental question is, where does creativity come from? In what part of our being does it reside? Some anthropologists look for the roots of creativity in human biology and physical structures, particularly in the architecture and processes of the human brain. Our species and our direct ancestors owe their success in large measure to their behavioral flexibility and knack for invention and innovation in the face of new circumstances and challenges.

Paleoanthropologist Steven Mithen (1997) considers the extent to which Darwinian theory can help us understand the development of the human mind and, by implication, our ability to create, innovate, and conceive complex ideas. Mithen argues that much of the innovation and creativity that characterizes human behavior is the result of cognitive fluidity, our ability to integrate across what he calls “bundles of mental modules”—for example our ability to integrate technical, social, and natural history knowledge across changing contexts. This “ability to integrate ideas and ways of thinking from what had been isolated domains of thought evolved due to the selective advantage it gave those individuals who could do things such as design better hunting weapons, or use material culture to mediate social relationships” (p. 72). While he focuses on how such cognitive fluidity can explain ritual and religious beliefs and behaviors, he states, “Religious ideas are just one type of thought made possible by cognitive fluidity. Another is pursuit of pure science—investing time in discovering laws of mathematics or the origins of the universe or of modern humans” (p. 73). Indeed, the human ability to conceive of new ideas to influence social and material conditions is a deep part of our heritage.

Although we recognize the likelihood that the pan-human capacity for creativity has a biological or innate component, anthropologists have discredited early attempts to ascribe a greater capacity for creativity to something inherent in a particular ethnic group or to people living in certain modern nation states. Responding to an effort to quantify the creativity—or “artistic genius”—of certain societies, R. Westwood Winfree (1974) identifies creativity as aspect of an individual, noting that “the causes of an individual’s genius are complex” (p. 341). In arguing that creativity and innovative bent are not innately tied to ethnicity, national origin, or other defined group identities, he cogently points out that efforts to do so largely “cherry picked” their data, selectively including or excluding cases in order to support a preordained—and usually political,

he notes—conclusion. Winfree points to the myriad factors that might contribute to an individual’s creative output, including the local cultural environment (for example the composer who draws from folk music traditions); exposure to influences encountered while travelling; individual social (financial insecurity) and psychological characteristics; and other personal traits rooted in family circumstances or physical attributes. He also acknowledges that there is likely an element of innate talent as well that might set some apart. Variation in human populations and among cultures suggests this makes sense, and it also means different kinds of creative abilities exist in any group.

Karen Milbourne’s study ([2000](#)) of Lozi basketmakers in Barotseland, Zambia illustrates the point made by Winfree that multiple economic, political, social, and individual factors undergird creativity and innovation. Milbourne writes about creativity not only in the production of crafts but also creativity in the collaborations among artisans, missionaries, and aid workers to develop a reliable market for the sale and distribution of those baskets. The people of Barotseland have long used craft production to establish connections with the outside world. A century ago, the primary craft exports were carved wooden bowls, many of which now grace the collections of museums throughout the world. Today, Lozi artisans primarily produce baskets for sale to expatriates and tourists as well as for export. As the collection and export of Lozi baskets expanded, they developed new production techniques and forms and added colors and designs to their “traditional” repertoire. Some of these innovations came from suggestions made by Euro-American missionaries and visitors, who have acted as purchasers, intermediaries, and agents for more than a century. Others came at the behest of King Lubosi Lewanika, an excellent example of a “cultural broker” (see discussion of [Press \[1969\]](#) below), who encouraged fine crafting and sponsored the export of Lozi art objects. Artisans found further inspiration by studying illustrations of other basketmaking traditions as diverse as those of Botswana and the American Southwest and blending elements of those styles with their own. Milbourne’s study further documents the specific circumstances of contemporary artisans who have innovated not only in their crafting but also in the methods through which they sell their products.

In his discussion of creativity, McLean ([2009](#)) challenges us to think beyond the Western dichotomy between nature and culture. In contrast with most of the other essays in this collection, McLean is not willing to restrict agency and creativity to humans; rather, he sees the material world as “imbued with its own dynamism and its own generative capacities” (p. 234). He gives us several ethnographic and historical examples of alternative visions of creativity. In one case, he shares ethnographic examples from Melanesia and Australia that depict a mythic age when the power of creation and transformation was ubiquitous across natural, supernatural, and human realms. His second scenario is based on the description of the creation of the universe offered by the Roman philosopher and scientist Lucretius. Here, creation is the result of disruption in the natural world; once humans come into being, they join in this reorganization so that “human knowledge and creativity participate directly in a set of larger, self-organizing material processes engaged in forming and transforming the physical universe” (p. 227). His third scenario focuses on the city of Venice, suggesting that the built environment is the creation of environmental and political factors as well as artistic imagination. In his telling, it is the

“mutual entanglement” of built environment and the city’s watery setting that “appears to provide the impetus for cultural invention” (p. 231). With these cases, McLean demonstrates that the effects of nature and culture are not easily differentiated.

### **Who innovates? Who creates? When, where, and why?**

Although it seems clear that neither creativity nor a heightened capacity to innovate is an inherent trait of a particular social or cultural group, cross-cultural studies of creativity and innovation can identify circumstances in which people are more likely to consciously experiment or improvise, giving us perspective on the contexts, processes, and consequences of creativity and innovation. Irwin Press ([1969](#)) points out that for the acts or products of creativity to succeed, the innovator must have a “mandate” or “permission” to innovate. Not surprisingly, much innovation occurs under unstable or changing conditions—be they economic, social, political, or religious—in order to address pressing problems. In some instances, certain groups—perhaps defined by age, gender, or other aspects of social identity—have more (or less) freedom to improvise or diverge from traditional practice. Anthropologists have also paid attention to situations in which creativity and innovation are suppressed, pointing out power dynamics that can have a chilling effect on individual expression as well as collective problem-solving. This latter observation demonstrates that the “permission” to which Press refers must be structural. That is, the social system and the actors within it must have a way to accommodate and utilize novel or reconfigured practices and things.

As noted earlier, much of the current popular discussion about innovation seeks to locate creativity outside established, mainstream institutions and practices. In an early exploration of the traits of innovators, Press ([1969](#)) discusses the concept of the “culture broker” as a key factor in understanding innovation and change. He rejects the idea that there are certain “types” of individuals who are likely to create or innovate, for example “either the prestigious, admired individual, or the maladjusted or frustrated, more or less depending upon whether the culture is in time of stability or crisis” (p. 205). Rather, he suggests that many cultural brokers have an “uneasy cultural or social identification,” (p. 207) which allows them to make use of novel ideas and items or rework traditional practices while remaining at least somewhat attached and familiar to others in their social sphere.

In many societies, there are some individuals or groups who inhabit fluid, ambiguous, or “peripheral” places in society and therefore might in some ways be freer to innovate or experiment. For example, anthropologists have explored a common assumption that children “naturally” experiment as they learn and develop various skills, and thus might be a significant source of innovation. In studying ceramics from prehistoric Huron sites in south-central Ontario, archaeologist Patricia Smith ([2005](#)) identified a category of vessels she thought were likely made by children, presumably those just learning to make pots. Several characteristics of these pots indicated that the makers had poorly developed motor skills and less-than-consistent ability to achieve appropriate design placement, both criteria traditionally used by archaeologists to identify the products of children/learners. She then carefully examined temporal patterns in the

innovation and adoption of new designs, hypothesizing that if children were the innovators, new designs would appear first on pots made by juveniles and later on pots made by adults. Historical data indicated that the Huron were matrilineal, so that three generations of women typically resided together. Further, potting was a female task. Smith's analysis demonstrated that juvenile and adult pots were in fact decorated differently, but that there was no simple, linear change from generation to generation. Rather, some temporal changes in the use of motifs supported her hypothesis that "experiments" during childhood became regular practice in adulthood, but in other cases children seemed to "revive" older elements, suggesting they were taught in part by their grandmothers, rather than mothers. Overall, the greater variation in children's pots suggests that learners did not mechanically copy designs; rather, they were given room to experiment with the context of learning to make pots although most of those innovations did not "stick" as they reached adulthood.

Immigrants are another group often perceived as occupying the social periphery. A key element of current debates about immigration in the United States revolves around the role of immigrants in innovation through the creation of jobs, creation of businesses, and creation of (new) things. Many anthropological studies confirm that immigrants often bring with them transformative skills and talents; anthropologists have long recognized lasting changes that occurred in regions where migrants settled. In an archaeological case study from the American Southwest, Barbara Mills and her colleagues (2016) discuss how migrant Kayenta potters developed a new style of ceramics that came into high demand within their host communities. Pre-migration Kayenta potters were skilled specialists, held in regard, often producing pottery to exchange throughout the region. The authors could trace the movement of Kayenta potters because they brought with them distinctive manufacturing methods and elements of style, such as design layout and color combinations and adapted them to local conditions as they settled into host communities. Mills and her colleagues demonstrate that the bonds between migrants and hosts increased over time, associated with the development of new ceramic technologies such as glaze-painting and a variety of polychrome decorative styles. Over time, these new styles became central to communal ceremonies and feasting and eventually a new socioreligious movement in which the descendants of both hosts and migrants participated. Thus, Mills and her colleagues show how creativity and innovation lead to practices that become "tradition" within the course of just a few years.

Creativity and innovation—ironically—often come to the fore as people strive to maintain their "traditions" in the face of changing circumstances. This "creativity in the following of tradition" involves improvisation to express and maintain traditional forms and practices, as we see in people's response to COVID-19 restrictions and in many of the examples discussed above. COVID-19, of course, required extremely rapid adjustment and innovation; in many other cases, the adoption of new or modified practices takes place over decades or generations. Ann Stahl (2015) examines how West African metalworkers improvised their practices in the face of changing global relations during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries C.E. Stahl's (2015) interest is in how people simultaneously improvise and "make things stick" (following Barber 2007), how they attempt to "carry on" during periods of big change. As an archaeologist, she can of

course see the outcome of the changes people experienced, but her goal was to envision the world as her subjects might have perceived it. Thus, she prefers the word “improvisation” to “innovation”—arguing that the latter word is retrospective, while the former takes the perspective of people confronting changing circumstances.

Many studies have shown that performing rituals and making offerings to supernatural forces was an important part of pre-industrial metalworking, acting to control dangerous powers, protect practitioners, and pragmatically to sequence and time the production steps. Stahl reveals how changes in ritual deposits made in the metal workshop at the site of Banda reflect expanding regional networks and changing sociopolitical dynamics over the century the workshop was in use. Over time, metalworkers retained some elements of their divination and propitiation practices, but also replaced some and added new ones, including some that reflected interactions with Niger River market centers as well as carnelian and glass beads that came from “distant lands” (p. 65). One particularly intriguing item added to the ritual repertoire was a set of miniature manacles placed within the final shrine just before the intensification of the Atlantic slave trade. This latter item—associated with “capture and confinement of humans,” she argues, “alludes to moral dilemmas and a need for vigilance felt by those who composed it.” Overall, the changes in ritual deposits over time reflect the “intensification and growing importance of inter-regional connections” to the West African smiths (p. 65).

Many ethnographic studies of creativity and innovation have observed how “traditional” artisans and craft producers respond to changes in the demand for their products. Andrew Causey ([1999](#)) explores how Toba Batak wood-carvers in North Sumatra—already producing “neo-traditional” items based on local forms and designs for sale to Western tourists—continued to innovate in the 1980s and 1990s in order to counteract over-production, market saturation, and changes in consumer tastes. Ironically, the woodcarving tradition was almost completely lost in the first part of the twentieth century, when the majority of Toba Batak converted to Christianity and traditional carved images lost their meaning. Many families realized they could sell their now useless wooden objects and use the cash to invest in businesses or educate their children. As the “stock” of older pieces was depleted in the 1970s, the few remaining carvers began to produce imitation objects. Changes in the economy generally and land-holding practices in particular led to increased reliance on woodcarving as a primary source of income in and around tourist centers. Unlike in many other parts of the world, in North Sumatra neither individuals nor families control ancestral forms and designs and there are no restrictions on who can carve. Thus, opportunities abound for resourceful, creative individuals.

Because so many pieces had been carried away before the wood-crafting revival, Toba Batak carvers sought out images of original pieces, often in museum catalogs, for inspiration. Most carvers produced a limited repertoire of forms and designs and often made large numbers of identical items to work efficiently. However, this practice ran against the tourists’ interest in purchasing something “unique” and “authentic.” Causey found that a few carvers began creating more innovative carvings—combining traditional forms in new ways or creating new functional types. He learned that these carvers were motivated to innovate both by a desire to relieve their



boredom and by a desire to catch the eyes of tourists looking for distinctive mementos of their encounters with the people of North Sumatra. Not surprisingly, many of these innovative items were quickly copied by less inventive carvers, often made more crudely and more cheaply, but nevertheless appealing to uninformed, budget-conscious tourists.

In contrast with the many examples of how creativity and innovation are sparked and fostered, J.J. Brody (2000) provides insight into how power dynamics can suppress creativity and innovation. He traces the history of contemporary Native America painting, which was initially taught in government run schools, and details how Euro-American “outsiders” often stifled the individuality and creativity of Native American artists during much of the twentieth century. Collectors and dealers encouraged early twentieth-century artists to paint scenes that were “nostalgic, romanticized, exotic, idealized, stylized, and sanitized” (p. 17). These outsiders also strongly discouraged artistic self-expression and individuality. Brody explicitly acknowledges how early twentieth-century Indian painters were exploited. He notes that even well-meaning dealers and scholars “clung to the obsolete, generations-old view that Indian art was a product of ‘tradition’ rather than of people ... [an] essentially non-intellectual art, made in response to tribal social, genetic, and historical imperatives... There was little sympathy for innovation and less for works expressive of personal life experiences” (p. 19). He makes a strong case for rethinking how “outsiders”—collectors, dealers, anthropologists, and art historians—understand and evaluate art that is “foreign” to them. He also strongly calls for these outsiders to appreciate—rather than shun—works that are more individualistic or don’t conform to outsiders’ stereotypes.

### **Inspiration and innovation: How can creativity be learned or taught?**

Finally, we ask, how do individuals cultivate the creative capacity inherent in all human beings? Nicholas Kristof (2021), a New York Times columnist, recently noted that, “Talent is universal, while opportunity is not.” With guidance and resources, individuals can inspire themselves to channel their talents to generate successful ideas and practices. Similarly, anthropologists consider how individuals express cultural creativity as a social and embodied process. Rather than simply producing entirely unique ideas, creative individuals learn to improvise by connecting preexisting ideas and actions with new ways to think about their media, intellectual domains, and social and natural worlds.

Peter Roe (1980) looks at the process of learning to craft, discussing the tensions between “a cultural imperative for personal innovation and submission to the constraints of traditional style” among Shipibo artisans (p. 42). Roe conducted an ethnographic study of Shipibo women’s cloth painting to test a hypothesis, widely debated in archaeology, that patterning in design configurations reflects patterning in social relations—that is, similarities in motifs, structures, and layouts should correlate with social structures such as learning contexts, work groups, and marriage rules. Although today Shipibo ceramics and cloth are largely sold to outsiders, when Roe conducted his fieldwork women primarily painted cloth to be worn as a wrap-around skirt and pots to be used for brewing and serving fermented beverages. Women’s painting is highly valued in Shipibo culture, and women will travel to other villages to take inspiration from

renowned artists. However, each woman maintains her own individual repertoire of designs, based on a common core of elements and rules. Generally, the Shipibo value innovation within traditional constraints. Girls learn to paint by working alongside their mothers. Because cloth requires three applications of native plant dye, mothers will lay down the first coat to establish the design and then daughters will trace over the lines, applying the second and third coats of pigment. Thus, girls learn both motor movements and design structure. The main geometric design is subject to strict formal rules, but filler motifs are often more randomly placed, resulting in variation, with some items filled with busy, complex designs and others sporting bolder, but simpler ones. For the Shipibo, a “good” artist—and they do evaluate each other’s work, albeit not face-to-face—will use the “rules” for creating the geometric patterns in a more complex, “playful” way.

Music education offers another practice to grasp how individuals improvise within existing cultures of innovation. Eitan Wilf (2012) examines jazz music programs in a US college context and focuses on what he calls the paradox of “training the body and liberating it” and “rituals of creativity.” Instructors guide students in learning to produce jazz masters’ innovative solo performances. Students play solo in synchrony with an original recording of a jazz master. In this way, learners inhabit the innovation of earlier jazz musicians, a practice that depends on recorded music since few live music options exist for new musicians to immerse themselves in a creative process. Wilf shows that activities that may seem like imitation are actually musicians embodying improvisation practices, which encourages individuals to learn creativity in their live performances even as they draw inspiration from elements of prior musicians. Thus, these contemporary music students learn to be “creative” in much the same way that Shipibo girls learn to paint cloth and Huron girls learned to decorate their pots. All these studies show that the creative process involves both imitation as well as recombining existing elements into new forms that convey meaning for people gathered in new contexts.

Just as museums highlight creative individuals and their innovations, they can also serve as places that foster creativity. Shari Sabeti (2015) explores ways people experience learning to be creative writers in relation to art museum spaces, artifacts, and conversations in the United Kingdom. With an ethnographic focus on how people experience inspiration, Sabeti challenges a common assumption that art objects and their creators possess the primary agency to generate inspiration that others require to create new cultural forms. Instead, Sabeti explores how people experience their creativity as an ongoing social process involving mutual interactions among art objects and people over time. Creative writers report that original artwork and artists themselves do not inspire personal creativity in a linear fashion. Rather, inspirational encounters with art objects occur in a broader social context, where new artists discuss and inspire each other to generate novel artwork. Guides and facilitators mediate interactions with art objects on display, but observers learn how to improvise with open conversations with others they trust to offer supportive criticism. Rather than highlighting the potential for objects displayed in a museum to generate inspiration, individual writers report that their creative processes involve learning to look for and create inspiration in complex relationships with art objects, tools, mediators, and other people who gather together and share supportive conversations.

Many of the studies in this collection demonstrate how creativity and innovation are learned and encouraged in social settings. As Perkins (2004) emphasizes in his discussion of Iroquois beadwork, “the creation of beadwork generally occurs in the company of others with whom a range of beliefs and cultural activities are shared. In addition to creating a sense of an aesthetic community, activities in these settings may include everything from conversations about specific patterns and use of the indigenous languages to sharing of daily news and educating the younger generation through storytelling” (p. 597). Thus, creativity becomes an everyday activity, embedded in larger social interactions and relationships. This complex process is similar to the one documented by Sabeti and resonates more generally with processes described by Roe, Smith, and other authors in this collection.

### **Concluding reflections**

This collection of anthropological perspectives on creativity centers on several themes. Anthropology challenges the false dichotomy between “tradition” and “innovation”. Many of the authors reveal how invention and innovation are social processes that are connected—rather than opposed—to normative or traditional ideas and patterns. A fundamental notion is that people are always improvising and innovating, whether to develop something novel or to maintain a cherished practice in the face of changing social, political, or environmental conditions. Studies of past and contemporary societies emphasize that creativity is part of the human experience, and all humans are constantly improvising, innovating, and creating. Creativity itself can be tradition, and innovation may allow some traditional forms to persist. Even individuals acting on the social periphery draw on tradition as part of the context for inspiration and innovation. In this sense, creativity does not demand that individuals produce unique, unpredictable, and unexpected ideas, objects, and practices by rejecting tradition. Tradition allows for innovation, and innovation supports tradition. Many of the articles collected here demonstrate that we often have to learn tradition so that we can be creative. These cross-cultural studies show that individuals learn how to embody and experience creativity with others, how to be inspired, and how to improvise in ways that connect and extend preexisting cultural forms in new directions.

The articles in this collection also demonstrate that creativity and a capacity for innovation are not innate qualities of a few talented individuals or members of a particular ethnic, national, or other social group. Rather, cognitive fluidity—the ability to link seemingly disparate ideas in new ways—is a fundamental characteristic of all human beings. Thus, everyone has the capacity to learn to innovate. Nevertheless, anthropological studies do reveal that some social contexts are more hospitable to novel or reconfigured ideas than are others. They also show that some individuals or groups—defined in different ways in different contexts—may have more or less “permission” to experiment and innovate. Moreover, people respond creatively to a plethora of influencers, such as colleagues, consumers, tourists, dealers, collectors, schools, the natural world around them, and the objects in museums, and exposure to these influential agents varies in a whole host of ways.

Our cross-cultural exploration underscores that many economic, political, social, religious, and individual factors undergird creativity and innovation. Social inequality shapes what political and economic demands produce and constrain innovation. In this sense, creativity entails complex interactions involving opportunities and expectations to create ideas and practices that may serve some interests more than others. How innovations produce usefulness or value often depends on social forces that esteem some innovations more than others.

Anthropology also reveals that creativity and innovation are often collective processes, the outcomes of collaboration and mentorship, not of lone, isolated “geniuses.” Creativity and innovation are socially situated, whether it involves artisans viewing each other’s works or artists responding to feedback from tourists, dealers, and collectors. Thus, as Perkins ([2004, p. 597](#)) notes, we need to pay attention to the “social practices of production.”

Another key point is that creativity and innovation are more likely to be fostered in contexts that support intellectual breadth across broad domains of knowledge and the cognitive fluidity necessary to integrate them. Although some thinkers today promote the notion that extended practice in a narrow realm or range of competencies is the most likely path to “success,” this success often takes the form of mechanical proficiency, not creativity. While creativity and improvisation are grounded in previous knowledge—“tradition” writ large—and likely require the acquisition of core skillsets, the examples included here demonstrate that new ideas and configurations are more likely to emerge when people have exposure to a wide(r) range of ideas and have the freedom and skill to apply them. The takeaway is that rather than requiring people to specialize narrowly, especially early in their education or career, we should be encouraging them to experiment and develop breadth.

In sum, as people come up with new ideas and practices, some stick and others do not. Along the way, people share creative experiences by guiding and innovating with each other. We might not know for some time which of the COVID-19 era improvisations will hold—and become “tradition”—and which were temporary adjustments in the face of crisis. Nevertheless, what we have seen most powerfully is something that anthropologists have long maintained: we inhabit a shared creative world where people constantly improvise and experiment, circulating new ideas that open new possibilities for further actions and interactions. In short, being human is itself a creative practice.

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Retrospection, Memory and Imagination in the Study of 20th-century Native American Art History

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