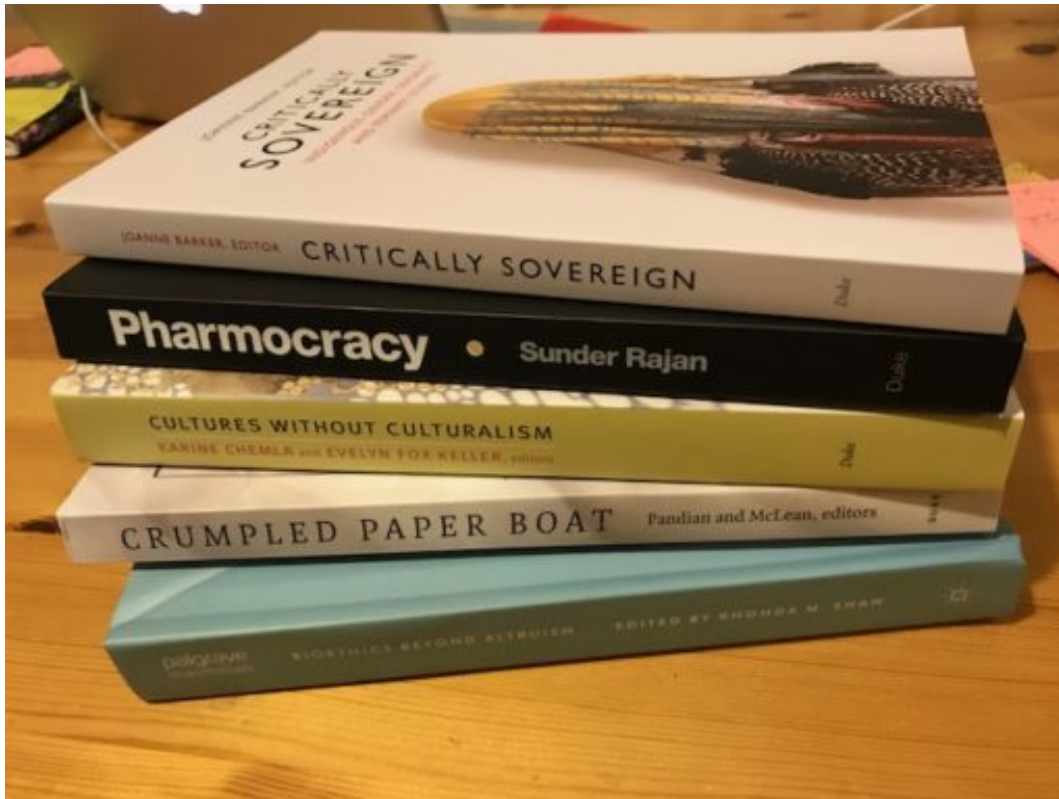


<http://somatosphere.net/2017/12/top-of-the-heap-nayantara-sheoran.html>

## Top of the heap: Nayantara Sheoran Appleton

2017-12-21 09:25:30

By Hannah Gibson



For this installment of the Top of the Heap series, I spoke with [Nayantara Sheoran Appleton](#), who is a medical anthropologist and lecturer in the Cultural Anthropology program at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

### Reading in the Antipodean Summer

In May, as the winter winds whipped through Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand, I ordered a few books from Duke University Press, induced by its half-price sale. A number of them were new releases that immediately made it on to my “must read now” list. But life intervened. It seemed like an impossible task to get to them as I settled into my first year of teaching in a new programme in the Antipodes. Over the past few months, I have longingly looked at my stack of new books while grading papers, replying to administrative emails, or working through a few revisions on articles. As

Christmas and New Year descend upon us, marking the official summer holiday season here, I have moved my reading pile from the office to my home. Progress!!!

One of the first books I intend to read is Kaushik Sunder Rajan's [Pharmocracy: Value, Politics, and Knowledge in Global Biomedicine](#) (Rajan 2017). It addresses some of the issues I tackle in my latest project on stem cell research and therapy in India. Rajan's previous work, including [Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic Life](#) (Rajan 2006), was instrumental for my doctoral research on emergency contraception in India, and I can only imagine the valuable insights I will be able to draw on from this follow-up.

*Pharmocracy* looks at international pharmaceutical regimens and how they work within a democracy to create structures (through regulatory frameworks and neoliberal health policies) that are detrimental to the interests of India's citizens. Playing on the word democracy, he used "*pharmaocracy*" to denote the way democratic institutions and democracies (like India) are subsumed to the global capitalistic interests of the pharmaceutical industry. This gels with an argument I have been developing in my own current research project, as I think through stem cell research and therapies in India and the political-economy of bioethics as they are mobilized in service to global biocapital (Appleton and Bharadwaj 2017a; Appleton and Bharadwaj 2017b). *Pharmocracy*, as a first read of the summer, will allow me to reimagine my field sites in India and set me up for some good writing in the New Year.

The next book on the list is Karine Chemla and Evelyn Fox Keller's edited collection titled [Cultures without Culturalism: The Making of Scientific Knowledge](#) (Chemla and Keller 2017). It is a timely intervention on how 'culture' has been mobilized within social scientific scholarship to engage with science and scientific knowledge. Science studies scholars have seen the tools they devised to critique science, with the aim of improving it, co-opted by science deniers. An edited volume like this allows us to re-examine our earlier critiques and re-imagine what the next turn in science studies will look like. Careful not to raise alarm bells (I have browsed the introduction), this collection promises to be an engaging read that will generate ideas on how to continue to hold science and scientific knowledge accountable, whilst being careful not to allow that critique to collapse into essentialist readings of how culture and science interact. In particular, as an anthropologist who looks at medico-scientific spaces, this edited volume will be vital reading as I start next year on my writing project on stem cells.

Two other edited volumes, while contributing to my research, will also be important reads for more prosaic reasons. [Crumpled Paper Boat:](#)

[\*Experiments in Ethnographic Writing\*](#) by Anand Pandian and Stuart McLean (Pandian and McLean 2017) promises to be a delight based on some of the reviews I have read. Between methods and writing, it appears as a generative space for theoretical engagements that are willing and able to upend static boundaries and allow space for creative expressions in anthropology. For somebody who enjoys writing *ethnographically* but also feels constrained by the expectations of academic writing, I am hoping this creative experimental edited volume serves as a gentle reminder that writing anthropologically can take many shapes and forms.

The other edited volume on my list is [\*Critically Sovereign: Indigenous Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies\*](#) by Joanne Barker (Barker 2017). This promises to be vital as I prepare a new course on Gender, Sexuality, and Kinship in the cultural anthropology programme at Victoria University of Wellington. It will also allow me to read in an area that brings together two of my academic and teaching interests: gender & sexuality and indigeneity. While gender and sexuality and feminist theories have been an instrumental part of my academic life for a long time, issues around indigeneity have become more important to me recently as I (an immigrant) have moved to Aotearoa, New Zealand and live on the lands of and under the hospitality of indigenous communities. Through academic texts like *Critically Sovereign*, I hope to continue to engage more personally with the politically charged and socially important conversations on the rights of indigenous communities in settler societies.

Finally, the fifth book on my list is also an edited volume, by Rhonda Shaw titled [\*Bioethics Beyond Altruism: Donating and Transforming Human Biological Materials\*](#) (Shaw 2017)[1]. While I have a chapter in the book, I have not had the opportunity to read the other chapters in it. Some of the chapters are directly related to my work, but others not so much – helping me read more broadly in the area of bioethics (and in my case, beyond stem cells). Sometimes edited volumes emerge from collaborative projects and similar intellectual conversations. At other times, they are a collection of divergent conversations on similar topics that an editor brings together in order to facilitate a conversation. This edited volume is of the latter sort, with Shaw deftly curating interdisciplinary conversations via engaging chapters on the bioethics of donating, sharing, transforming biological material – ranging from human organs and gametes to breastmilk and stem cells. Reading this book, and thinking about my own contribution to this conversation on bioethics, should be a good way to wrap up the summer of reading and preparing for the upcoming academic year.



With luscious red summer blooms of the pohutukawa tree blowing gently in the breeze and barbeque smells wafting in the air, I am being coaxed away from my computer and invited to start on this reading stack that's been waiting for way too long. Happy holidays (and reading)!!!

[Dr Nayantara Sheoran Appleton's](#) *research and teaching interests are in the following areas: Feminist Medical Anthropology and Science and Technology Studies (STS); Cultural Studies and Media; Reproductive and Contraceptive Justice; Critical Kinship; Ethics and Governance; Regenerative Medicine; and Ethnographic Research.*

Images:

Stack of books: Sheoran Appleton.

Pohutukawa Tree:

<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/photo/pohutukawa-flowers>

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[1] Not a Duke University Press publication

### **AMA citation**

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