

Preface

This volume originated from a panel we convened at the combined Australian Anthropology Society, Association of Social Anthropologists and Association of Social Anthropologists Aotearoa New Zealand (AAS/ASA/ASAANZ) conference in Adelaide in December 2017. Participants were invited to consider how ideas of the state as a central actor in resource relations are formed, negotiated and enacted, and how these relations subsequently influence events, elicit specific effects and shape outcomes at resource extraction projects. Collectively, their papers and the discussions that followed demonstrated two things: the diversity of ways in which the state is articulated and experienced in the context of resource extraction; and the opportunity and value of studying the state from the vantage point of resource extraction.

We did not begin with ‘absent presence’. This concept followed rather than preceded the conference panel, emerging during the day’s final discussion on the ways in which the state is present and/or absent in resource extraction contexts in both Papua New Guinea and Australia (and beyond), and the effects this produces. In the months that followed, we asked the panellists to revisit their papers and think about their material in relation to the ‘absent presence of the state’. The chapters presented here are a result of this process.

We think this concept has provided fertile ground for a wider discussion about how we conceptualise and study ‘the state’, and the kinds of knowledge and insights this produces. We also hope that it opens up new spaces for thinking about the entanglements, uncertainties and relations that characterise resource extraction.

In focusing the analytical lens on the state, and proposing a new framework for studying the state from the vantage point of the extractive industries, this volume builds upon a theme running through the Asia-Pacific Environment Monographs (APEM) series, namely the politics of resource extraction. This volume maintains a regional focus on Papua New Guinea and Australia with the exception of the final chapter, which introduces New Caledonia as a point of comparison to test whether the notion of ‘absent presence’ can be applied to the study of state processes and state effects in other jurisdictions. In this sense, our volume builds upon previous works that have compared the social and cultural effects of resource use in Papua New Guinea and Australia, including James Weiner and Katie Glaskin’s *Customary Land Tenure and Registration in Australia and Papua New Guinea* (2007), also published in this series. In introducing New Caledonia, our volume also complements another volume in this series that compared the ‘local-level politics’ of resource extraction in Papua New Guinea and New Caledonia (*Large-Scale Mines and Local-Level Politics*, Filer and Le Meur, ANU Press, 2017). Our volume extends that focus, since state actors certainly do have some presence in the local-level politics that ‘surround’ large-scale resource extraction projects in all jurisdictions.

This project was first conceived at the Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining at the University of Queensland (UQ), where Nicholas currently works and where Emilia was a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research Fellow (2017–19), funded from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 753272, in a joint appointment between the University of St Andrews in Scotland and UQ, where she remains an Honorary Research Fellow. The centre has proven to be an encouraging and enabling environment for this project given the significant amount of research conducted within the centre on resource extraction in Australia and Papua New Guinea. Reflecting this research focus, when Emilia commissioned Simon Gende, an artist from Goroka in Papua New Guinea, to produce a series of mining-related paintings, he dedicated one of the images to the work of the centre, so we have included the artwork here in acknowledgement of Simon and the scholarly support provided by the centre.



Figure 0.1 Bikpela mining kamap na ol sumatin blong university blong Queensland kisim helikopta na lukluk raun long mining area: social responsibility in mining students. [Large-scale mining has come up and the students of the University of Queensland got a helicopter and are looking at the mining area: Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining students].

Artwork: Simon Gende, 2019. Emilka Skrzypek personal collection

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Nick Bainton and Emilka Skrzypek
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