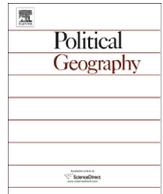




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A forest of dreams: Ontological multiplicity and the fantasies of environmental government in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

How do invisible beings in the forested hinterlands complicate the work of bureaucrats in the capital? What do dreams and the beings who visit them have to do with state power? Despite a deepening commitment to posthumanism, political ecologists have rarely opened our accounts of more-than-human assemblages to what have conventionally been termed “supernatural” or “metaphysical” forms of agency. To counter this lingering ethnocentrism, I argue here for an ontologically broadened understanding of how environmental government is produced and contested in contexts of difference. My argument draws on ethnographic fieldwork on Palawan Island in the Philippines, where the expansion of conservation enclosures has coincided with the postauthoritarian recognition of Indigenous rights. Officials there have looked to a presumed Indigenous subsistence ethic as a natural fit for conservation enclosures. In practice, however, Palawan land- and resource-use decisions are based, in part, on social relations with an invisible realm of beings who make their will known through mediums or dreams. These relations involve contingencies that complicate and at times subvert the designs of bureaucratic conservation. As a result, attempts to graft these designs onto Palawan practices do as much to engender mutually transformative encounters between contrasting ontological practices as they do to create well-disciplined eco-subjects or establish state territoriality. To better understand the operation of environmental government – and to hold it accountable to promises of meaningful local participation – political ecology should, I argue, attend more carefully to the ontological multiplicity of forces that shape spatial practices and their regulation.

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How do invisible beings in the forested hinterlands affect the work of bureaucrats in the capital? What do dreams and the beings who visit them have to do with state power? Political geographers now regularly trace how “more-than-human” assemblages of humans, plants, animals, microbes, and biophysical processes animate (and complicate) the spatial designs of state power. These developments are promising, but as a challenge to Eurocentric dualism they have not gone far enough. Even as the nature/society divide has given way to new, ontologically “enlarged” ways of imagining politics (Hobson, 2007), the category of “supernatural” has remained largely intact, leaving questions such as those posed above largely outside the bounds of political geography. This paper aims to further broaden the field’s ontological purview by arguing that so-called “supernatural” or “metaphysical” forces, such as

invisible beings and dream encounters, also have a profound effect on politics. Such “supernatural” agencies, I propose, are no less significant in the (de)constitution of state power than many of the more directly observable agencies whose interactions we are accustomed to tracing.

This proposition has overlapping theoretical, methodological, and practical implications for ongoing debates in political geography and political ecology. Theoretically, it calls for a deepened commitment to posthumanism and, more importantly, to the recent effort to “decolonize” posthumanist geography by engaging more deliberately with Indigenous philosophies and ontological practices (Sundberg, 2014). Methodologically, it builds on the growing interest in participant observation – premised on the idea that everyday life both reflects and shapes broader political processes – by calling for a radical-empiricist pursuit of more-than-human ontological analysis (Hagene, 2010; Megeran, 2006). And, practically, this paper contributes to efforts by postcolonial geographers to challenge the mutually constitutive relationship

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between imperial formations and analytical categories (Sidaway, Woon, & Jacobs, 2014). Specifically, I suggest that prevailing assumptions about the inexorable march of territorialization and ecogovernmentality overlook the continued prevalence of Indigenous world-making practices and thereby risk naturalizing ongoing processes of colonization (Gombay, 2015; Sundberg, 2014).

My argument arises from ethnographic research on Palawan Island in the southwestern Philippines (Fig. 1). Since the fall of the Marcos regime in 1986, Filipino policymakers have been at the forefront of a global effort to reconcile the expansion of conservation enclosures with the recognition of Indigenous territorial rights. Philippine laws for Indigenous rights are among the most robust in the world, but embedded within them is the expectation that Indigenous values and practices will work in harmony with bureaucratically managed conservation enclosures. Like its counterparts in other parts of the neocolonial world, this policy conditions the recognition of indigeneity – and thus the recognition of territorial rights – on Indigenous peoples' cooperation with government environmental regulation. Such policies have, in effect, merged the modern state's quintessential project of territorialization with one of ecogovernmentality (Bryant, 2002; Cuasay, 2005; Dressler, 2013; Eder, 2010).

Here I argue that, at least in the Palawan case, more-than-

human social relationships involving invisible, forest-dwelling beings impact how these interlocking technologies of government unfold in practice. This argument has profound theoretical and practical implications, but political geography cannot even begin to assess it if we cling to conventional assumptions about the composition of the world and the distribution of intentional subjectivity therein. To loosen our grip on such assumptions, my analysis will trace how invisible forest people have complicated relations between an Indigenous Palawan community and the conservation enclosure that demands their cooperation. I will show that, although they begin from differing ontological assumptions, the world-making practices of state interventions are never separate from or impervious to those of the Palawan. Both are part of a “unified but polarized reality” (Atleo, 2011), in which certain ontological propositions acquire the status of “reality” through their association with state power (Nadasdy, 2003, pp. 138–139).

Stuart Elden (2010) has pushed political geographers to approach the spatial categories of the state (e.g., land, territory, property) not as ontological givens, but as projects through which state power is itself enacted and naturalized. We can, I propose, take Elden's critical project a step further by broadening the ontological purview of political ecology beyond its Eurocentric comfort zone. Instead of treating the spatial projects of the state as

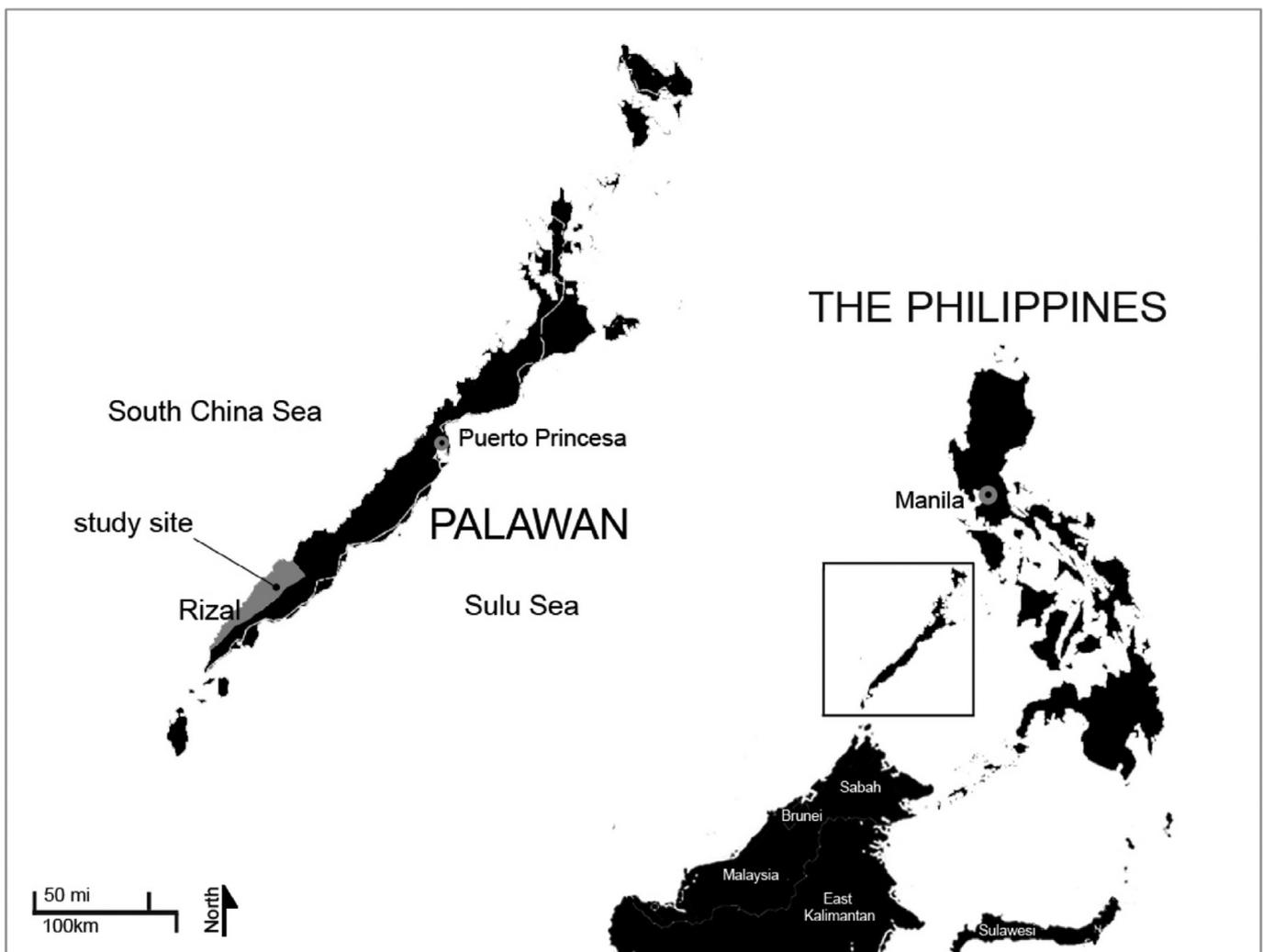


Fig. 1. Map of the Philippines and Palawan.
Source: Map by author.

vectors of a separate, “modern” world that is destined to replace Indigenous worlds as it encounters them, we can approach them as spatial contestations that bring competing ontological assumptions and world-making practices into mutually transformative encounters with one another.

In what follows, I will begin by situating this proposition within ongoing debates around posthumanist approaches to ontological multiplicity and radical empiricism. How, I ask, can we posit and document a world in which invisible forest beings shape government environmental regulations (and vice versa)? My attempt to answer this question involves broadening political geography’s ontological purview, but aims to do so in a way that both avoids essentialized renderings of ontological difference and acknowledges Indigenous contributions to posthumanism. A decolonial and posthumanist political geography, I will argue, must engage a much wider range of ontological propositions not just theoretically but also experientially (e.g., through collaborative co-construction of knowledge, as [Bawaka Country et al., 2015](#) have recently demonstrated, and through immersive research methods like participation observation, as I will discuss below). Then, after introducing my case study, I will relate ethnographic encounters illustrating two specific ways in which Palawan relations with their invisible counterparts have complicated the government’s efforts to regulate Palawan uses of the environment. Each of these encounters will begin with a fragment of dreamlife. The first fragment will illustrate the ethical considerations involved in Palawan relations with their invisible neighbors and how these considerations differ from the subsistence ethic envisioned in Philippine policy. The second will illustrate the situational manner in which many Palawan make decisions about forest clearance and how this contingency interferes with the state’s efforts to integrate Indigenous practices into its system of discrete, impersonal spatial categories. Finally, I will conclude by reflecting on how Palawan ontological practices shape (and potentially challenge) ongoing processes of colonization – and on how political ecologists studying such processes can avoid naturalizing them.

Broadening the ontological purview

It was August 2012, and I was in Tenga’t Gebaq, a mountain hamlet on Palawan Island in the far southwestern Philippines.¹ An unremarkable day was coming to an unremarkable end. As the sun disappeared behind the trees, everyone gathered to watch television together at Jimi and Palaya’s house as theirs was the only one in the hamlet with a generator and TV/DVD set. Jimi and Palaya were my hosts, so I too participated in this nightly ritual no matter how many times they showed the same dubbed Korean soap opera.

On the evening in question, the gathering lasted no more than an hour before the old generator ran dry and sputtered to a stop. Within minutes, everyone had filed out of the house, extracted their cell phones from the tangle of cords around the communal outlet, and walked home in the moonlight. As I settled into bed, I chatted with Jimi, Palaya, and their children – another of our routines. Just as my mind was fading to the black of sleep, I heard a rustling somewhere around my bed, then a sinister but indistinct whisper. Before I could react, a bony hand swept across my face and clamped itself over my nose and mouth. There was suffocating pressure on my chest, as if someone were sitting astride me. Twitching my arms and legs, I found myself virtually paralyzed and, though I tried desperately to cry for help, my voice was stifled by the powerful hand.

Then I heard a voice. It was Bina, Palaya and Jimi’s eldest

daughter. “Mom,” she cried, “what’s going on?!” Her voice quaked with genuine alarm. As I lay there in a cold sweat, my heart pounding, I realized that I had been dreaming.

“He was dreaming,” Jimi said, with no small measure of alarm in his own voice. “Noah, are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied, “it was a bad dream.” Startled but still exhausted, I soon fell back asleep, only vaguely aware of an owl hooting somewhere nearby, its call a distinctive cackle unlike that of any I have heard elsewhere (probably the species *Strix seloputo*).

The next morning, as we sat sipping instant coffee, I apologized lightheartedly to Palaya and Jimi for the disturbance. I then learned, much to my embarrassment, that they had not slept well, that poor Bina and her younger sister had been too frightened to sleep alone, and that the several nearby families had felt an ominous presence in the air afterward. My dream, Jimi explained, was what the Palawan call a *deletdet* (or *penglek*) – a potentially lethal type of nightmare. Jimi had been rising to intervene when I awoke. If I had not done so on my own, he would have had to fetch a *belyan* or shaman to try and prevent my death.

“It was the owl,” Palaya whispered. “The owl?” I asked, perplexed. Jimi and Palaya elaborated on their theory that an owl had inflicted the *deletdet* upon me (“*dineletdet ke et gukguk*”). I knew that some Palawan considered owls to be bad omens, but this was the first I had heard about an owl attacking a person in a dream. Owls, it turns out, are shape-shifters who can attack in various ways, such as by appearing in dreams or by taking the form of trusted familiars in need of a place to stay and then devouring one’s flesh while one sleeps.

What I experienced as an intense but fleeting nightmare (and perhaps a side effect of my malaria prophylaxis) was, for my Palawan hosts, a potentially deadly act of sorcery (*kependayan*). To them, it was mysterious and difficult to interpret, yet it was no less “real” or dangerous than if it had happened while I was awake. This is because Palawan do not conceive of dreams as figments of an unconscious mind whose imaginings are ontologically segregated from waking life. Rather, dreams reflect what one’s *kurudwa* (souls) do in the world while other elements of the person are asleep (see [Revel, 1996](#); [Macdonald, 2007](#), pp. 98, 124). Dream experiences are one of the primary means through which Palawan encounter the invisible people (“*taw na diki megkebiri*”) with whom they share the landscape. Dreams, therefore, offer an important source of insight into how Palawan contend with the claims of their invisible neighbors and, thus, into how those claims come to shape the state’s efforts to enlist Palawan in projects of territorialization and ecogovernmentality.

In this section, I outline a theoretical and methodological orientation that brings the political agency of invisible beings out of the realm of the ‘supernatural’ and into a field of more-than-human social relations. Human geography has seen a flourishing of interest in posthuman, more-than-human, distributed, network, and hybrid theories of agency ([Anderson, 2014](#); [Dittmer, 2014](#); [Murdoch, 1997](#); [Panelli, 2010](#); [Sundberg, 2011](#); [Whatmore, 2002](#)), the significance of which I will address below. My aim here is to bring this broadened outlook on agency into more explicit dialog with questions of what Blaser calls “ontological multiplicity” ([Blaser, 2014](#), 53). Ontological multiplicity refers to conditions under which different ontological assumptions confront one another through the “world-making” (or “worlding”) practices that they inspire ([Blaser, 2014](#), p. 53; see also [Wilson & Connery, 2007](#); [Ivakhiv, 2012](#)). Like [Blaser \(2009\)](#), I am concerned with the ontological multiplicity that characterizes relations between bureaucratic institutions and Indigenous populations, such as we find in Palawan. Following [Atleo](#), however, I do not present ontological difference as a clash between different ontologies or “worlds”; I wish to avoid suggesting that “Palawan ontology” is a reified entity or that different groups of people live

¹ Tenga’t Gebaq is a pseudonym, as are all personal names appearing herein.

somehow in different “worlds” (Bessire & Bond, 2014; Ramos, 2012). Instead, I posit a “unified but polarized reality” (Atleo, 2011) in which practices deriving from varying ontological assumptions interact with (and potentially transform) one another.

My approach also draws inspiration from Mark Jackson's critique of postcolonial geography, in which he challenges a “fundamental Euro-modernist privileging of the nature-culture distinction” (2014, p. 74). This bias, I contend, persists even among political ecologists and, as a result, risks inevitabilizing the domination of the ontological assumptions most closely associated with the colonizing designs of state power. We should instead aim to avoid uncritically reproducing the ontological banishment or ‘supernaturalization’ of “mysterious incalculable forces” (Weber, 1946, p. 139) as this banishment in turn naturalizes the ontological, epistemological, and social underpinnings of capital's ongoing expansion. How, then, do we go about doing so?

Posthumanism

Posthumanism, as Sundberg (2011) has argued, suggests one answer to this question. Influenced directly or indirectly by theorists like Derrida, Deleuze, Latour, Haraway, and Nancy (see Braun, 2002; Castree et al., 2004; Lorimer, 2012), geographers increasingly use “[c]oncepts like network, assemblage, or collective [...] as analytical tools for visualizing how unique and historically contingent associations between entities [...] gather in ways that stabilize a particular socio-political order” (Sundberg, 2011, p. 321). In loosening “the exclusive hold of humanity on political agency, we open ourselves up to agencies unlinked to an intentional subject” (Dittmer, 2014, p. 397). As a result, things like scallops, mosquitoes, viruses, glaciers, marine plastics, documents, water infrastructure, and desert brush now figure centrally in our accounts of political life (Bear, 2013; Bingham, 2006; Cruikshank, 2005; Meehan, 2014; Mitchell, 2015; Nading, 2014; Ranganathan, 2015; Shaw, Robbins, & Jones, 2010; Sundberg, 2011; Weisser, 2014). And, finally, by locating ontogenesis in political-ecological entanglements among organisms, things, and biophysical processes, more-than-human geographies have helped envision alternatives to the anthropocentric forms of belonging that underpin planetary ecological crisis (Buller, 2015; Gibson-Graham, 2011; Ginn, Beisel, & Barua, 2014).

But this ontological unsettling has not gone far enough. Even among political geographers who have embraced posthumanism, few take seriously the “demands of beings that were comfortably put away as creatures of human imagination” (Stengers, 2010, 4).² Paraphrasing Stengers (2010), Blaser (2014, p. 51) notes that this neglect stems from “the homogeneity of assumptions that help to sort out legitimate from illegitimate matters of concern.” What this means is that conventional positivist assumptions about what constitutes physical reality still provide a default standard for legitimating research questions and methods. Even brilliant work, therefore, often sustains some of the “unacknowledged realism” that emerges whenever we fail to situate our knowledge-making practices (Braun, 2002, p. 273), thus limiting how effectively we can interrogate the “separation of [ontological] spheres” that underpins technoscience, capitalism, and bureaucracy (Ladwig, 2012, p. 428).³

The promises and pitfalls of this proposal are more than theoretical. Excluding such so-called “creatures of human imagination”

also excludes, again in Stengers (2010, p. 4) words, “the concerns of all humans, both individual and populations, who do know that Gods, djinns, or the Virgin Mary matter” (see also Chakrabarty, 2000; Watson, 2011). Political ecology is no exception. Kim, Ojo, Zaidi, and Bryant (2012) have argued that political ecology as a whole remains dominated by Anglo-American researchers, thereby “naturalizing Anglo-American assumptions” throughout the field as a whole. To the extent that Indigenous peoples' ontological propositions come into view, they often appear as somehow separate from and threatened by those of the modern world. This has, in turn, led to something of a backlash against ontological analysis among those who find it essentializing and disempowering (see, e.g., Bessire & Bond, 2014; Fabricant, 2013; Ramos, 2012). Likewise, Sundberg (2014) notes that much posthumanist work in geography, including some of her own, has unintentionally reasserted the superiority of Western onto-epistemology over Indigenous approaches. This happens when (1) “we” criticize “our” ontological categories without explicitly positioning ourselves vis-à-vis our publics and (2) when we then focus on recovering nondualistic ways of thinking from *within* Eurocentric social and political theory. What results is an “overwhelming silence about Indigenous scholarship” (Sundberg, 2014, p. 36) and about nondualistic philosophies apparent in contemporary Indigenous world-making practices (see also Escobar, 2007).

A related pitfall of ontological analysis is the temptation to use “non-Western,” “pan-indigenous,” or otherwise generically “pre-modern” ontologies as a foil for “modern” or “Western” ontology. In such accounts, the former are thought to retain an ontological wisdom that the latter has lost. Like the tendency to salvage nondualistic threads within “modern” theory, the genericization of non-Western ontologies betrays an epistemological conceit whereby the analyst has comprehensive insight into how thousands of distinct peoples view and enact the world. This tendency is readily apparent in Latour's (2013) recent assertion that all peoples contend with what he calls “beings of metamorphosis,” but that only so-called “Moderns” insist on sequestering them to the “interior” world of the mind.

Intrigued though I am by such propositions, I fear that they retain just the sort of ontological uniformity that the social sciences have long shared with other “modern” knowledge practices – including, ironically, those that reify the state, nature, and the human subject. Latour (2013, p. 204) tells us that the many different sorts of invisible beings he encounters in the ethnographic record, as well as those that “Moderns” relegate to the mind, constitute “the subtle elaborations invented by all the collectives to explore the crossing between the beings of reproduction and those of metamorphosis.” But can we really speak with such functionalist certainty about the universal significance of such beings? My Palawan colleagues did not describe their invisible counterparts as their way of addressing a universal human problem. From their perspective, these beings are not there to help account for uncertainty; they help constitute a field of more-than-human social relations that bring with them a host of often uncertain, but materially real accountabilities.

In short, a posthumanist embrace of ontological multiplicity offers a needed challenge to political ecology's Eurocentric assumptions, but this comes with risk of reifying ontology, ignoring broader political-economic processes, and silencing (or over-generalizing) Indigenous contributions to nondualistic thinking. My own effort to avoid these pitfalls owes a great deal to the Nuuchahnulth thinker E. Richard Atleo, who is also known as Umeek. In particular, I draw inspiration from the Nuuchahnulth principle of *tsawalk* (oneness), which Atleo (2011) defines as positing a “unified but polarized reality” – a world that is common to all beings but in which there exist multiple, radically variable ways of

² Cultural geography has done more in this respect, with two very recent examples including Bawaka Country et al. (2015) and Latta (2014).

³ One recent exception is Murrey's (2015) analysis of witchcraft along the Chad-Cameroon Oil Pipeline, although she describes witchcraft in epistemological rather than ontological terms.

assembling that world and the beings that inhabit it. According to Atleo, world-making practices differ not just in terms of the ontological assumptions they enact, but also in how they are positioned with respect to the coercive and epistemological power of state institutions. We must, then, see colonization not just as the expropriation of resources, the transformation of landscapes, or the expansion of state power, but also as the systematic imposition of ontological categories and associated world-making practices. At the same time, however, Atleo's writing is itself a testament to the fact that colonial encounters do not have uniformly assimilative outcomes. Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world endure, and they too shape the politico-spatial formations that colonial encounters engender. An ontologically broadened political ecology – one capable of accounting for the political effects of invisible beings – approaches conditions of ontological multiplicity occasioned by colonial encounters not as vestigial moments in an inevitable process of assimilation, but as the very practices through which assimilative projects are enacted, contested, and potentially subverted.

Radical empiricism

If political ecologists wish to make analytical space for Indigenous ontological propositions, the corrective should not be further immersion in Euro-American philosophy (although such perspectives obviously remain important). Rather, we should look to how actual world-making practices confront one another in the emergent world around us. Indigenous scholars in a number of regions have offered their own challenges to Euro-American dualism (see Sundberg, 2014, who highlights among others: Cajete, 2000; Deloria, 2003 [1973]; Gegeo, 2001; Kuokkanen, 2007; see also Atleo, 2011). Likewise, Indigenous movements have introduced new ontological propositions into (trans)national politics, such as the legal recognition of earth beings in the Andes (de la Cadena, 2010; Escobar, 2010; but see Fabricant, 2013, regarding the exclusionary pitfalls of these movements).

But what are we to do in contexts where subaltern or Indigenous ontologies receive recognition only *after* they have been reduced to “cultural traditions” or “ethnic identity” (Blaser, 2014; de la Cadena, 2010; Povinelli, 1995, 2002)? As will become clear below, this is what I encountered in the Philippines, where the legal recognition of indigeneity sidesteps ontological questions. Such contexts require that we look to micro-level encounters for the “traces” of ontological multiplicity that emerge in practice (Sundberg, 2011, p. 322; see Watson, 2011, for a proposal to trace ontological multiplicity historically). As Blaser reminds us, “worlds and the borders that delineate them have to be *traced* constantly for they are in a constant state of becoming” (2009, p. 16, my emphasis).

To operationalize this tracing, I expand on Megoran's (2006) call for political geographers to realize the potential of ethnographic participant observation. Like Megoran, I see participant observation as complementing rather than replacing political geography's conventional reliance on discursive and textual analysis; unlike Megoran, I am interested less in how participant observation “illustrat[es] emic categories of meaning” (627) than in how it can unsettle the ontological assumptions that underlie what we consider emic and etic in the first place. My approach takes a cue from Nadasdy (2007), who operationalizes Michael Jackson's (1989) work on “radical empiricism,” an approach that considers all ontological propositions as potentially valid (Simpson, 2000). Radical empiricism pushes us to engage not just in participant observation, but in “radical participation,” so that we can “treat [our] own experiences as primary data” (Nadasdy, 2007, p. 36). During fieldwork in the southwest Yukon, Nadasdy had an experience which, for him, confirmed the Kluane proposition that

animals, as other-than-human persons, intentionally “give” themselves to hunters. Thus inspired, he urges us to “acknowledge that [Indigenous ontological propositions] are not just cultural constructions and accept instead the possibility that they may be actually (as well as metaphorically) valid” (Nadasdy, 2007, p. 26). The point is not that non-indigenous analysts must personally validate Indigenous ontological propositions through their own experience, but rather that we should not let our unacknowledged assumptions anesthetize us to experiences otherwise (although see Wainwright, 2008 for caveats about ethnographic empiricism as colonizing practice).

“How,” asks Hunt, a Kwakwaka'wakw scholar, “do we come to know that which is rendered outside the knowable world? [...] [F] or non-Indigenous people interested in engaging with Indigenous ontologies,” she suggests, “this may involve becoming unhinged, uncomfortable, or stepping beyond the position of ‘expert’ in order to also be a witness or listener” (2014, p. 31). In this spirit, I offer my experience with the *deletdet*, as well as the ethnographic encounters that I relate below, as literal accounts of beings that have material if uncertain consequences in the world. But Hunt (2014, p. 31) also asks: “what does it mean for Indigeneity to be theorized, accounted for, and constructed as a category, within hegemonic geographic systems of knowledge production where only a small number of Indigenous people situate their work?” It means, at the very least, that some caveats are in order. While I intend this paper as part of a broader effort to decolonize social theory, my approach is not without its limitations.

Both posthumanist and radical empiricist approaches risk reifying and essentializing difference. It is not the case, for example, that all Palawan give their dream experiences or the words of shamanic diviners the same weight as they do their waking experiences. Some surely doubt whether invisible people are, in fact, “real” at all. Others adjust their orientation over time. Many such nuances are lost in ethnographic translation and representation. Moreover, in illustrating what it means to take literally Palawan ontological propositions, I do not purport to offer a comprehensive account of their everyday lives or even of their ontological propositions. Nor do I purport to offer a collaborative alternative to ethnographic representation in the compelling manner of Bawaka Country et al. (2015). Rather, my aim is to illuminate how a marginalized aspect of Palawan peoples' experiences remains vital to their engagement with broader processes of social and ecological change. Doing otherwise, I contend, not only reinforces Euro-American onto-epistemic hegemony; it naturalizes the state's dream of territorialized ecogovernmentality for “frontier zones” like Palawan. As a person of European descent and a citizen of a settler-colonial state, I do not wish to speak *for* Palawan or any Indigenous peoples. I seek instead to fulfill a promise I made to my Palawan interlocutors: that I would represent what I learned in their company as part of a vibrant lived reality and not as a vestige of a way of life that is outmoded or disappearing.

Palawan in the world

The demonym Palawan – occasionally spelled Palaqwan, Palawan, or Pälawan – refers to a common, self-ascribed ethnolinguistic identity derived from the name of the island on which Palawan-speaking people have lived for many generations. With their present numbers estimated at somewhere between 40,000 and 50,000 (Macdonald, 2007, p. 11), Palawan-identified people now constitute a minority in the island's five southernmost municipalities. Like highland groups throughout the region, Palawan have long engaged in swidden agriculture, hunting, fishing, and the collection of other wild foods for subsistence purposes, and they have long participated in the trade of forest products for goods that

they do not produce locally, especially salt, kiln-fired ceramics, metals, and more recently cash.

Any account of contemporary Palawan experiences must acknowledge their long history of exchange with other societies and the tremendous changes they have experienced in recent years. Muslim traders have had a powerful presence in southern Palawan for nearly two centuries (Warren, 1981), leaving a sizeable population of “Islam” Palawan or Penimusan along the coast and exerting many influences on the population as a whole. Christianity has expanded rapidly in recent decades with the mass settlement of the region by migrants from other Philippine islands. An increasing number of Palawan live in lowland towns, send their children to school, and rely on intensive agriculture or wage labor for their livelihood. Dispossession has marginalized many Palawan into the uplands, while socioeconomic differentiation has intensified in tandem with monetization of exchange.

Given all of this past and present variation (Macdonald, 2007, 2008; Theriault, 2013), I would be remiss to imply that Palawan constitute a homogenous population clinging to their traditions. Many Palawan still do engage in practices they describe as consistent with the “ways of the ancestors,” especially swidden agriculture, shamanic healing, and customary law. But we must remember that, however distinctive or long-standing such practices might seem, they are dynamic and form part of a generative repertoire for navigating life in the present. Likewise, when Palawan experience interactions with their invisible neighbors, such as in the cases I describe below, they are not revealing themselves as relics of the past. These interactions too are a dynamic, actually existing, and consequential part of the rapidly changing world in which Palawan dwell.

Research setting and methods

This paper is based on eighteen months of fieldwork in the Philippines (November 2010–January 2012; May–August 2012; June–July 2014; and July 2015), which itself built on ten months of preliminary research between 2006 and 2008. Beginning in November 2010, I spent four months conducting background research on the Mt. Mantalingahan Protected Landscape (MMPL), a relatively new, 120,457-hectare conservation enclosure that straddles southern Palawan’s mountainous spine. This background research included semi-structured interviews with twenty-eight of the officials involved in the MMPL’s management, visits to each of the five municipalities with which it overlaps, and collection of documents pertaining to its operations. After this initial four-month period, I resided primarily in a village within the boundaries of the MMPL (see below), but I continued to visit the provincial capital to attend relevant meetings and to interview bureaucrats, activists, and business people whose work connected either to the MMPL or to environmental politics in southern Palawan. These methods have all aimed to ascertain how various political actors understand indigeneity and the role of Indigenous peoples in environmental regulation.

Between my first visit in March 2011 and my most recent one in June 2014, I have spent a total of seven months residing in the Palawan-majority hamlet that I identified above as Tenga’t Gebaq. As of 2014, Tenga’t Gebaq was home primarily to Palawan who had not converted to Islam or Christianity and who still practiced swidden in combination with subsistence- and market-oriented exploitation of “wild” resources. Although everyone in Tenga’t Gebaq was involved in some way in the cash economy, social differentiation remained relatively limited there compared to lowland towns. Tenga’t Gebaq was regularly visited by conservation officials because it was situated within both a government-recognized Indigenous “ancestral domain claim” and the Mt. Mantalingahan

Protected Landscape (MMPL). For this reason, although Tenga’t Gebaq did not encapsulate the full spectrum of contemporary Palawan experiences, it did offer an ideal vantage point from which to trace interactions between government institutions and what I considered to be a fairly typical Palawan community.

In the village context, participant observation of everyday life was by far my most important research method and how I learned most of the stories I relate in this paper. This included everything from helping with work in swidden fields, to participating in government-sponsored tree-planting ceremonies or meetings, to attending nuptials and shamanic rituals, all while engaging in an untold number of spontaneous but illustrative conversations and encounters. By staying for extended periods in a single community, I sought to understand the experiential and embodied qualities of everyday life that are difficult or even impossible to ascertain through interviews. While some of my activities were spontaneous (e.g., accompanying people to collect honey from a beehive they had spotted), most were targeted at understanding practices relevant to Palawan relations with the environmental bureaucracy: livelihood activities, visits by government officials, meetings, conversations about all of the above. In addition, over the course of my research, I conducted open-ended life-history interviews with numerous Palawan and non-Palawan residents in the area, as well as a survey of thirty-nine households in and around Tenga’t Gebaq. The survey elicited systematic data on changing livelihood strategies, experiences with government regulation, and understandings of political authority. This approach is consistent with a post-structuralist theory of power, whereby political institutions like the state are examined as an emergent effect of micro-level practices, rather than preexisting structures that themselves cause behavior (Abrams, 1988; Foucault, 1991; Nadasdy, 2003).

Dreaming of harmony

One of the MMPL’s founding myths is that the more than 12,000 Palawan living within it have embraced its existence. As required by both the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997 and the National Integrated Protected Areas System Act of 1992, extensive consultations were conducted prior to the MMPL’s proclamation in 2009. The NGO Conservation International led the consultation process, in which “tribal endorsements” were obtained for each of the thirty-six affected jurisdictions and verified by the National Commission on Indigenous People. In a project report to the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, CI wrote that “[t]he multi-sectoral team made sure that majority of the local communities including the indigenous peoples in the uplands were properly informed and fully understand the benefits of establishing a protected area [sic]” (Conservation International – Philippines, 2007, p. 4).

Indigenous people and their rights also feature prominently in the MMPL’s management structure. Five seats on the management board are reserved for Indigenous representatives, who are charged with helping ensure that the MMPL’s system of land-use zoning categories is “harmonized” with Indigenous land claims.⁴ The fact that many Palawan live within the MMPL’s “core zones” – areas where “human disruption” is strictly prohibited – is supposed to be reconciled by the law’s allowance for “traditional uses of tribal communities for minimal and soft impact gathering of forest species for ceremonial and religious purposes” (PCSD Resolution No. 94-44; see Fig. 2). Moreover, the law states, “[r]efinements [of] zoning [will] take into account indigenous knowledge systems and

⁴ A vast majority of the MMPL is classified as “core zone,” in which no human “disruption” is supposed to occur. Another 20.4% is classified as restricted, controlled, or traditional use zone.

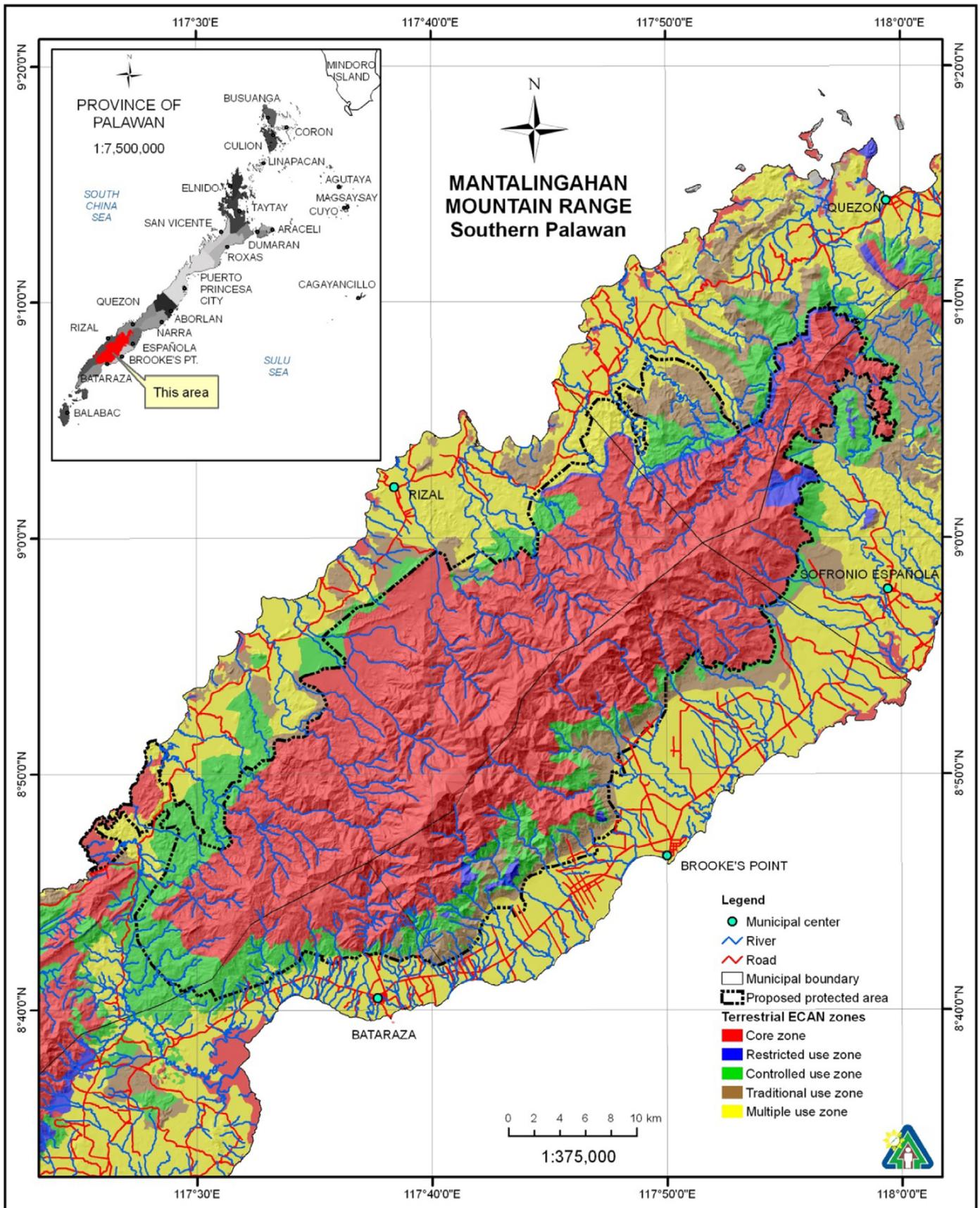


Fig. 2. Map of the MMPL showing its boundaries in relation to ECAN zones.
Source: Palawan Council for Sustainable Development.

practices.” On paper, the MMPL is explicitly designated to protect a *landscape*, and its human residents are supposed to be an integral part of its operation.

In practice, Palawan involvement in park management was limited, inconsistent, and in some cases fraught with distrust. These challenges came up frequently in my conversations with government and NGO personnel involved with the MMPL. “It is hard to ‘inject’ new ideas into the Palawan,” one government official told me.⁵ Another observed that the Palawan have been corrupted by gambling, drinking, and outside influences, all of which have led them to clear ever larger areas of the forest without regard for their traditional ethics.⁶ Perhaps most common of all was the notion that the Palawan simply lack the will to make long-term investments or commitments. They lack “discipline,” I was told.

Officials had varying views on how faults on the part of the Palawan hindered cooperation. But, perhaps predictably, they were less apt to identify the assumptions of environmental government itself as a problem. Take, for example, an NGO employee with whom I interacted regularly (and came to respect deeply). Once, during a frank exchange, I expressed my opinion that conflicting views of swidden were the greatest barrier to Palawan cooperation with the MMPL. She countered that the Palawan had, in fact, been eager to forge conservation agreements with her organization. She referred me to a letter from a Palawan elder claiming, in effect, that his community only practiced swidden because they were poor. Palawan are “easily brainwashed,” she explained, but otherwise they are naturally inclined to protect their ancestral domains. I responded by explaining my understanding of Palawan relations with the *taw’t talun*. Palawan would, I said, sometimes seek their permission to clear swiddens in areas that were previously declared taboo. She thought for a moment and then, with a look of incredulity, asked, “But do they *really* believe that?” Her question implied that Palawan might invoke this ‘belief’ as an alibi for disregarding their own tradition of not clearing large trees. She seemed skeptical that invisible beings could actually have an impact on her work.⁷

In what follows, I will show how invisible beings do indeed impact the operation of environmental government by illustrating two specific ways in which the world-making practices of government are complicated by Palawan interactions with their invisible neighbors.

Dreaming of angry giants

Oto was a young bachelor who came and went frequently in Tenga’t Gebaq while I lived there. Many young men, whether married or unmarried, remained attached to the households of their parents or parents-in-law, with whom they built adjacent swiddens and shared resources to varying degrees. But Oto’s parents and siblings lived closer to town, in an area that had been hemmed in by settlers and was not suitable for large family swiddens. Instead of trying to attach himself to another household, he instead floated around as a guest in various homes, earning money for food by collecting copal resin from *Agathis* trees high in the mountains and by performing wage labor on lowland farms. At one point, Oto teamed up with another young man to make charcoal for sale in the market.

After sharing a couple of charcoal piles with his friend, Oto



Fig. 3. Pile of wood for making charcoal.
Source: Photo by author, August 2011.

began to make his own. The process involves felling small-to-medium-sized trees, chopping them into small logs, and then arranging them conically around a cavity so that they will burn slowly from the inside out (see Fig. 3). A few days into the process, before he had begun the burn, Oto was confronted in a dream by a pair of angry giants. These giants were the otherwise invisible “people of the forest” or *taw’t talun*. *Taw’t talun* are the occupants and cultivators of the *talun*, which includes old-growth forests and other spaces that many Westerners would consider to be “wilderness”, such as along the forested banks of rivers and streams. *Taw’t talun* also often remain present in large trees left standing when the forest is cleared for swidden.

Taw’t talun are not the only type of invisible being whom Palawan recognize; others include the deified *empuq* (a celestial class that includes the “weaver” of the world, the “master” of swidden rice, the “lady” of the monsoon) and the benevolent, quasi-deity *diwata* (a class that lives high in the mountains). *Taw’t talun* differ from *empuq* and *diwata* in that they are unambiguously human and thus prone to emotions like anger and jealousy. *Taw’t talun* have powerful magic that they can use to attack Palawan by, for example, possessing them or causing one of their *kurudwa* (souls or elements of the person) to go astray. Although *taw’t talun* need not have a specific cause for attacking, they often do so as retribution for a transgression on the part of Palawan. For example, when Palawan clear a forested area without consent or when they overharvest rattan, they risk angering the *taw’t talun*. When treated poorly, *taw’t talun* may refuse to vacate prospective swidden fields or cast potentially fatal illnesses onto the offending individual or community.

Although they threatened to kill him if he continued making charcoal, the *taw’t talun* who confronted Oto did not reveal what specifically had offended them – i.e., whether the charcoal pile was encroaching on their home or was simply a practice they despised. Either way, Oto said, he would not attempt to make charcoal again for a long time, if ever. Even though he needed money, engaging in this “new” activity was not worth the risk.⁸

Not long before I first arrived in Tenga’t Gebaq, charcoal making had become a source of income for a significant number of households in the area. This laborious practice had gradually spread upstream, following the network of old logging roads, as the

⁵ Interview with staff of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, 2 December 2010.

⁶ Interview with staff of the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development, 15 December 2010.

⁷ Conversation with Conservation International staff, 27 August 2011.

⁸ Oto recounted his dream to me while we were hiking together in September 2011.

expanding lowland town's demand for charcoal grew and more accessible sources of wood were depleted. Just downstream of the hamlet, one cluster of households in particular had become heavily involved in charcoal making. They built their piles in plain sight, seemingly unconcerned that charcoal making was forbidden within a protected area like the MMPL. To the MMPL field officer who visited regularly, their behavior was troubling. He said he had considered establishing a biodiversity monitoring project in Tenga't Gebaq, but changed his mind when residents started making charcoal. This development, to him, signified a loss of tradition. He had so far focused on "educating" the Palawan rather than taking punitive actions, lest he alienate the community. But he wondered how much longer he could go without cracking down.⁹

Given Oto's experience, one might expect to find general agreement between the Palawan and conservation officials on the practice of charcoal making. For the Palawan, it can provoke the anger of the *taw't talun*. For government personnel, charcoal making is ecologically destructive and, therefore, forbidden within a protected area like the MMPL. Both see charcoal making as a "non-traditional" or "new" activity. One might note this agreement and conclude, as the MMPL field officer did, that charcoal making constitutes an unambiguous violation of both Palawan ethics and government policy. One might draw a similar conclusion about the clearing of old-growth forest, as was the case with the NGO employee mentioned above. Ultimately, though, these seemingly harmonious values derive from very different ontological assumptions.

Let us consider more carefully the aversion to "new" or "non-traditional" livelihood activities that Palawan seem to share with government. When Oto told me about his encounter with the *taw't talun*, I asked him if his experience would deter him from other activities that involve cutting trees, namely swidden. "*Kaya* (no)," he replied, accentuating his intonation to highlight the absurdity of my question. The dream, Oto explained, was not about swidden, nor was swidden, unlike charcoal making, a new source of livelihood (*bagung usa*). To the rest of my follow-up questions, Oto would only say "*ista ku kediye*" (I don't know [about] them) – as was often the case when I asked people about *taw't talun*.

Notwithstanding Oto's reticence, the newness of charcoal seemed to be the ethical concern in his case. Curious how those involved in charcoal making would interpret Oto's dream, I described it to Juhali, who was the eldest male in the cluster of charcoal-making households. He was also someone known for his shamanic skills, fluency in *tutul* (Palawan sung epics), and knowledge of the ways of the ancestors. Juhali surmised that Oto, by making a charcoal pile near an area of *talun*, had accidentally trespassed on the abode of invisible people. By contrast, Juhali explained, he and his neighbors were making charcoal only in *bengley* (relatively immature secondary growth) and, therefore, not at risk of trespassing. They would nonetheless take precautions around any large trees in the *bengley* by either leaving them intact or asking their invisible occupants to vacate (more on this practice below).¹⁰

Was Oto, then, simply more conservative in his ethics than Juhali? Was the MMPL official correct to see their contrasting behavior as a matter of differential adherence to "tradition"? Such questions, I would argue, make sense only if we reduce Palawan ontological propositions to "cultural beliefs" and cling to a simplistic understanding of how Palawan people like Oto and Juhali make day-to-day decisions about land and resource use. In fact,

Palawan contend with a complex array of factors, including their relations with the *taw't talun*, as they navigate the world. Recall that both Juhali and Oto considered charcoal making a "new" livelihood activity (*bagong usa*). Even though Juhali did not see charcoal making as inherently problematic, he did agree that it was "new" and, thus, ethically uncertain. When Palawan describe an activity like charcoal making as "new," they are referring not just to its relatively recent arrival, but also to the fact that money is involved. Subsistence activities, particularly swidden, hunting and gathering of wild foods, are considered customary or ancestral sources of livelihood. Anything that involves intensive, monetized exchange of goods or labor is described as "new" so that even an ostensibly ancient activity like honey gathering acquires novelty when the honey is sold at market. In short, even though Palawan have been involved in trade since time immemorial, the intensive exchange of goods and labor for money was considered by virtually everyone I asked to be a new and ethically troubling development.

Why should this development be ethically troubling? Their concerns stem from the high value many Palawan place on reciprocity. In my experience, many Palawan describe sharing of food as the height of moral personhood. Even though Palawan have presumably always varied in their enactment of this ideal and even though it seems increasingly out of touch with their lived realities, anything thought to discourage sharing remains subject to ethical stigma. The use of money is of particular concern. Things purchased with money or acquired with the intention of sale often remain outside the gift economy and, thus, run counter to the cycle of reciprocal sharing with one's visible kindred and invisible neighbors. For example, Palawan people I knew frequently gave away significant amounts of the rice harvested from their swiddens, but they were much less prone to do so with purchased rice. Palawan elders recounted ruefully how, just a generation ago, sharing was done with greater frequency and enthusiasm. Nowadays, they told me, people share begrudgingly or not at all. Instead, they sell forest products and use the money to buy food, which in turn they are loath to share. Similarly, between visible people and their invisible counterparts, monetization leads the former to take in excess of their needs and to treat gifts improperly by hoarding and selling them. Just as the gift economy will break down among Palawan if people do not fulfill their obligations to one another, invisible beings will withhold their gifts when they are treated improperly. This was said to be one of the reasons why certain wild foods are increasingly scarce. One could certainly translate this ontological proposition into a subsistence ethic or a belief in restraint, but only at the cost of truly understanding the more-than-human social accountabilities that it engenders.

Before moving on, let us consider briefly how one additional forest product – rattan – fits into Palawan relations with their invisible others. Among visible Palawan, only a few of the many varieties of rattan are considered edible, and even those are used mainly in house construction and to make baskets and a wide variety of other portable objects. When Palawan gather rattan, they do not, in my experience, refer to it as a gift from invisible beings (unlike honey, which was "shown" to them by the *diwata*). Rather, rattan is a crop planted by the *taw't talun*, who do not give it so much as tolerate its being taken. Thus, if one overharvests rattan in a particular area, the invisible person who planted it is apt to become angry and bring illness upon the harvester or their kin. In this respect, most varieties of rattan are different from pig meat or honey; as non-food items, there is less concern over whether they are shared within the visible community (although this is not to say that rattan harvested for domestic use or for food are not frequently shared). And yet, because *taw't talun* are angered by excessive taking of their rattan, similar ethical concerns apply to its gathering. Monetized commodification of rattan is, therefore, ethically fraught

⁹ Interview with MMPL field officer, 21 March 2011.

¹⁰ I first recounted Oto's dream to Juhali in October 2011, but we have spoken about relations with the *taw't talun* numerous times, mostly recently in July 2014.

insofar as it encourages harvesting in excess of need.

Government policy, for its part, treats these items quite differently. The government has no policy on the sale of swidden rice, provided that old-growth forest is not cleared to grow it. As far as the government is concerned, swidden rice is not a wild organism. It is illegal, however, to sell wild pig meat – but not because doing so will offend an invisible being. It is illegal because the Palawan bearded pig, like virtually all wild animals, is a protected species that can only be hunted for “traditional” subsistence or ritual purposes. Honey, for its part, can be sold with a government permit, and indeed the government and NGOs encourage Indigenous groups to sell honey and other “non-timber forest products” (NTFPs) as a form of sustainable development. The same is true for rattan and copal resin, which are among the NTFPs for which the government issues permits. Both rattan and copal resin have become big business in Palawan, so much so that they have been largely depleted in the northern part of the island. In the south-western part of the island, the boom did not get under way until the early 2000s. Nevertheless, by the time of my research, rattan had been depleted in many areas downstream of Tenga’t Gebaq and was being harvested with increasing intensity in the forests further upstream. There are regulations intended to limit NTFP harvests to sustainable levels, but these limits have not been effectively enforced (McDermott, 2000).

It is clear that, even though they risk illness by participating in it, ready access to an insatiable market for rattan has led many Palawan to risk provoking the rage of the *taw’t talun* by taking far in excess of their needs. Some who do so may claim not to believe in such things as invisible people, but during my time in Tenga’t Gebaq I heard regularly of illnesses attributed to overharvesting. Even if one is careful, as most harvesters claimed they were, one does not usually know if one has run afoul of the *taw’t talun* until after the fact – when a *belyan* (shaman) determines the cause of an illness. One man I knew had to go through an elaborate seven-week process – including planting of bamboo in the forest as compensation and a weekly ritual bathing of himself and a chicken – to rid himself of an illness caused by rattan harvesting.¹¹ Another man had a tooth removed from his leg by a *belyan*, who determined that an invisible dog kept by *taw’t talun* had bitten the man while he was gathering their rattan (Fig. 4). The invisible tooth caused a prolonged illness in the man’s toddler son. Per the *belyan*’s instructions, the man had to make a batch of rice wine, which was offered to the weaver of the world (*empuq*), to the angered *taw’t talun*, and for good measure to the ancestors (*kaguranggurangan*).¹²

The uneven regulation of forest products by the government seems arbitrary from a Palawan perspective (and vice versa) because the ethical concerns in either case are based on conflicting ontological assumptions. The former revolves around the question of how to protect *wild* organisms from *human* exploitation, while the latter revolves around how to coexist with one’s visible and invisible fellows. This ambivalence was clear in the differing responses that Oto, Juhali, and the MMPL field officer had to charcoal making. If we take Palawan ethical concerns out of their ontological context, we could conclude not only that Palawan ethics mirror government policy but also that Oto’s response marks him as more “traditional” or “authentic” than Juhali. But when we take ontological multiplicity into account, we find that such variation depends, in part, on how people navigate the more-than-human social relations in which they are embedded. These relations unfold through a pragmatic process of negotiation and appeasement, not an impersonalized list of rules. Such situational contingency is also



Fig. 4. *Belyan* with the tooth of an invisible dog that he removed from the leg of a man who had angered the *taw’t talun*.
Source: Photo by author, July 2012.

important in the context of swidden, to which I turn now.

Taboo dreams

Projects of territorialization and ecogovernmentality involve both the imposition of abstract spatial categories like land, natural resources, and property and the translation of local spatial practices into categories legible to the state (Nadasdy, 2003; Scott, 1998). As with the regulation of forest products, complications arise when official categories miss the array of concerns informing Palawan decisions about where to cut their swidden fields.

Take, for example, land that Palawan consider *lihyen* or “taboo” – parts of the *talun* (old-growth forest and other “wild” spaces) that are off-limits to swidden and potentially to other activities. *Lihyen* most often comprise specific parts of the landscape, such as where certain types of trees grow (e.g., *nunuk* or *ficus*), along the banks of rivers and streams, in places associated with particular stories, or in places where invisible people have refused requests to vacate. In government and NGO documents, *lihyen* are usually translated as “sacred places” (“*sagradong lugar*” if in Tagalog). *Lihyen* are thought to be ideally suited for conservation and are often invoked by both Palawan and non-Indigenous activists in efforts to counter outside interests like mining companies. In practice, however, the notion of sacredness provides a potentially misleading translation of *lihyen* because it implies a degree of fixity and consensus not necessarily present among the Palawan and their invisible neighbors (cf. Dove, Sajise, & Doolittle, 2011). As I will show below, places acquire meaning through relations that are ontologically incommensurable with the discrete and fixed spatial categories of environmental government.

Just upstream of Tenga’t Gebaq there was an area that virtually everyone agreed was *lihyen*. Upu Isu, the most respected *belyan* (shaman) in the area, considered it *lihyen*, and he said it had been so since his parents’ time, at least. The distinguishing characteristic of this particular area, which was on a small mountain at least seven kilometers inland, was that it contained a grove of a tree species (*buneg* [*Garcinia* sp.]) that Palawan associate with lower elevations. *Taw’t talun* must have cultivated these fruit-bearing trees on the mountain and, thus, would be angered if the trees were cut. Over the years, Upu Isu said, the *lihyen* status of this area was confirmed by both dreams and divination. This *lihyen* had wider recognition

¹¹ This took place in November 2011.

¹² The offering and extraction took place on 29 July 2012.



Fig. 5. An example of a *petendaq* used to divine the will of the *taw't talun*.
Source: Photo by author, July 2012.

than any other I heard mentioned during my fieldwork.¹³ Even so, its boundaries were subject to negotiation.

My host, Jimi, had experienced this contingency for himself. Once, about ten years before I came to live with him, he had wanted to cut a swidden near the *lihyen* in question. He went to the spots that would have marked the boundaries of the swidden and called upon (*tinkeg*) the invisible occupants of the place to make their will known either in his dream (*peteginep*) or by upsetting a tripod of small branches that he built on the ground (*petendaq*, see Fig. 5). A few nights later, he had a mysterious but frightening dream in which his toddler son went missing. He searched desperately in the forest, only to find the boy sitting alone on the opposite side of a rushing river. Jimi reported this dream to Upu Isu, his wife's uncle, who advised him not to clear the area in question because its occupants had threatened to take his son. The area in question was, evidently, also *lihyen*. Jimi could have asked the *belyan* to try and negotiate with the invisible occupants, or he could have tried to do so himself. In this case, however, he was wary of endangering his son, so he decided not to pursue the matter further.¹⁴

Translating this particular *lihyen* as a sacred place would partially encapsulate its significance. But it would also be misleading. By the time of my fieldwork, another area adjacent to the one in question had been cleared by a related kin group, who had built a half dozen swiddens and houses there. The eldest couple in that group told me that they had called on the invisible occupants before clearing the land and had not cleared anything that was *lihyen*. They did not, for that matter, consider what they cleared to be *gebaq* (old growth), but rather *bengley* (secondary growth), which does not typically contain trees large enough to be of interest to *taw't talun*.

Thus, contrary to the fixity implied by "sacred" places, the boundaries of *lihyen* may be subject to contingencies at the micro level. *Belyan* have an important role in determining which areas are *lihyen*, but their classifications are not always universally recognized, and it is not really their role to compel peoples' cooperation. Invisible beings are the ones who actually punish Palawan for violating *lihyen*, but whether they will do so in a particular case is difficult to predict. For this reason, Palawan practices around *lihyen* are much less standardized than what the government's land-use zones would indicate. Those zones are based on discrete,

territorial categories of land use that do not consider more-than-human social accountabilities or the high degree of personal discretion that Palawan exercise in negotiation of those accountabilities.

To conclude this section, let us return to a question I posed at the outset: how *do* invisible beings in the forested hinterlands affect the work of bureaucrats in the capital? Like its counterparts in various parts of the world, the Philippine state envisions a world in which Indigenous ancestral domains can readily double as conservation enclosures because of their residents' adherence to a subsistence ethic. To the extent, however, that Palawan practice a subsistence ethic, it coincides only superficially with the logic of bureaucratic conservation. Rather, their interactions with the landscape reflect a host of factors, not the least of which are their relations with the invisible beings with whom they share it. The importance of dreams, divination, and propitiation in these more-than-human social relations contrasts starkly with the state's bureaucratic approach to delineating discrete land-use zones and regulating human actions therein. Consequently high levels of interpersonal, spatial, and temporal variability run headlong into official expectations of uniformity.

Dario Novellino (2003) has made a similar argument about relations between conservation officials and Indigenous Batak people in central Palawan. However, unlike Novellino's analysis, mine has not emphasized the breakdown of Indigenous ontological practices in the face of social and ecological upheaval. Rather, I have aimed to show their continued relevance in shaping both Palawan engagements with change and in shaping their relations with government institutions seeking their cooperation. Crucially, Palawan are not simply abandoning their world-making practices as they engage with those of settlers and the state. Rather, for many Palawan men and women, rapid social and ecological change intensifies their interactions with the invisible people who live in and around the forest. That is, the more that Palawan people are embroiled in the commodification of land and forest products – and the more they therefore deviate from the ethics and laws of the ancestors (*keedatan et kaguranggurangan*) – the more they have to worry about provoking the wrath of their invisible counterparts.

Conclusion

In July 2015, I met for coffee with my friend Bon, a Palawan man who serves in the legislative assembly of a southern municipality. We discussed his ongoing effort to formulate a new municipal ordinance that recognizes Indigenous practices regarding the placement of swidden fields. A major challenge he faces is deciding how best to codify the sorts of practices I have described in this paper, including, for example, those determining which parts of the landscape are *lihyen* (off limits to swidden). Because such determinations often emerge through relations with the invisible *taw't talun*, I asked Bon whether the ordinance would include provisions recognizing their presence. Bon had of course considered this, but chuckled wearily at the prospect of translating the complexity of those relations into the language of law. What, after all, would such a translation entail? Would it force him to reduce the lived reality of his fellow Palawan into the terms of a system that does not, in fact, recognize that reality as such?

Probably so. This is among the dilemmas that Palawan and many other Indigenous groups face in their dealings with the state. These dealings, even when framed by laws protecting Indigenous rights, are nearly "always already conditioned by unequal relations of social power" (Wainwright & Bryan, 2009, p. 156). The spatial manifestations of this paradox are relatively well documented. Wainwright and Bryan, for example, have argued that "cartographic-legal strategies" for asserting Indigenous rights in Central

¹³ Upu Isu and I have discussed these matters numerous times, but this particular point came up in a conversation we had in July 2012.

¹⁴ Jimi recounted this dream to me during a conversation we had in July 2012.

America end up “literally helping the [state] to see indigenous people and places [and thereby] align [them] with the expectations of state institutions [...]” (2009, p. 167). In Southeast Asia, where policies of Indigenous recognition are comparatively rare, geographers have focused primarily on how state regulation of minority populations reinforces broader processes of “internal territorialization” (e.g., Peluso & Vandergeest, 2001) and establishes (eco) governmentality (e.g., Goldman, 2001). The Philippines is no exception, even though it was the first country in the region to afford special rights on the basis of indigeneity. McDermott (2000), Minter (2010), and Li (2010) have each suggested that the bureaucratic imposition of communal land tenure mechanisms, which is at the heart of the Philippines’ Indigenous Peoples Rights Act, ultimately serves as a means to manage or obscure dispossession rather than actually prevent it. Meanwhile, as Cuasay (2005), Bryant (2002), and Dressler (2013) have pointed out, there could hardly be a clearer example of ecogovernmentality than the Philippine government’s expectation that Indigenous groups assume responsibility for conservation.

Without a doubt, the case explored in this paper falls in line with these patterns. But this is not the point I have chosen to foreground, for, like Rutherford (2007), I am wary of the tendency to portray processes of territorialization and ecogovernmentality as inevitable or complete. As Wainwright and Bryan suggest, the abundant aporias of our neocolonial times do not have definite analytical or political endpoints. They instead call for “radical questioning” with an eye to “new possibilities for political struggle and more radical forms of geographical justice” (2009, p. 170).

Beginning from its own set of radical questions, this paper has argued for an ontological broadening of political geography and, by extension, political ecology. Posthumanist efforts to trace political-ecological assemblages are a step in the right direction. But most work in this vein has so far left intact the boundaries that relegate certain ontological propositions to the realm of the “supernatural” or merely “symbolic.” This boundary not only impoverishes our empirical understanding of more-than-human assemblages; it naturalizes ontological propositions that in turn favor the expansion of bureaucratic power and capitalism.

I have proposed, therefore, that posthumanist scholars make a firmer commitment to ontological multiplicity. Although there is more than one way to go about achieving such a commitment, I have focused here on the need to engage with Indigenous philosophies and on prospects for radical empiricist approaches to participant observation. My argument has, moreover, sought to address valid concerns about the potential for ontological analysis to essentialize difference as if “ontologies” were homogenous unto themselves and only practiced in isolation. Much to the contrary, we can (and must) avoid treating the world-making practices of state interventions as separate from or impervious to those of Indigenous peoples. Both, I agree with Atleo (2011), are part of a “unified but polarized reality” in which varying ontological propositions meet one another in unequal but mutually transformative encounters. As de la Cadena (2010) has argued, attention to ontological multiplicity pushes us to conceive of politics not as struggles over power or resources within a prefigured universe, but as “pluriversal” encounters among different ways of bringing worlds into being. Thus conceived, ontological or pluriversal politics open up spaces in which Indigenous world-making practices can challenge ongoing processes of colonization and dispossession.

Elden (2010) has urged political geographers to approach the concepts and categories of spatial analysis – including the very notion of space itself – with caution. Uncritically taking, say, boundaries as the ontological starting point of analysis overlooks the processes involved in producing space as something that can be measured and bounded. Similarly, I have in this paper cautioned

against starting with dominant ontological propositions about the human/nonhuman and natural/supernatural, particularly when it comes to locating intentional subjectivity, agency, and sociality as dimensions of political-ecological formations. This is not, I should clarify, a naïve suggestion that anyone can simply cast aside their own ontological propositions and adopt new world-making practices. Rather, it is a reminder that, whether one “believes” in invisible beings or not, the relational ethics those beings inspire have an impact on the world and may indeed offer ethical guidance for living in a more ecologically accountable manner.

A *belyan* named Lido loved to tell me about the time a non-Palawan farmer had learned not to discount the *taw’t talun*. Before selling his land and moving further into the mountains, Lido used to live on flatter land near the municipal road. Over the years, the land around his house was bought up by migrant settlers so that eventually he was living side by side with a fairly well-off settler who hired him periodically to help clear and plant the land. One night Lido had a dream that prompted him to advise his neighbor against felling a large ficus tree (*beringin*) standing in the middle of what would become a rice paddy. Lido and other Palawan workers refused to clear the tree, but his neighbor dismissed them and said he would do it himself. That night, the man saw a blinding white light appear above the tree and got a call on his cellphone from a “crazy” (*gila*) woman speaking English. Thoroughly disturbed, the man told Lido what he had experienced and that he had changed his mind about the tree.

Lido laughed every time he told this story, recalling proudly how he had pointed at the tree and reminded his neighbor that “we have a neighbor here [...] even if you can’t see them.”¹⁵ When I first heard this story, I asked Lido whether his neighbor had dreamt this experience or whether it had happened while he was awake. Lido hesitated before replying that the man had dreamt it, dismissed the dream, and then had the experience again while awake. His hesitation reminded me that, from a Palawan perspective, this question was entirely beside the point. The tree still stands, and the man learned to take the *taw’t talun* seriously.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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¹⁵ Lido has told me this story several times, most recently in July 2012. This quotation combines two sentences from his recounting, repeated in Tagalog as he would have spoken to the settler: “May kapit bahay tayo dito” (We have a neighbor here) and “May tao dyan kahit ‘di mo sila nakikita” (There are people [living] there even if you can’t see them).

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