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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 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).

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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 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.

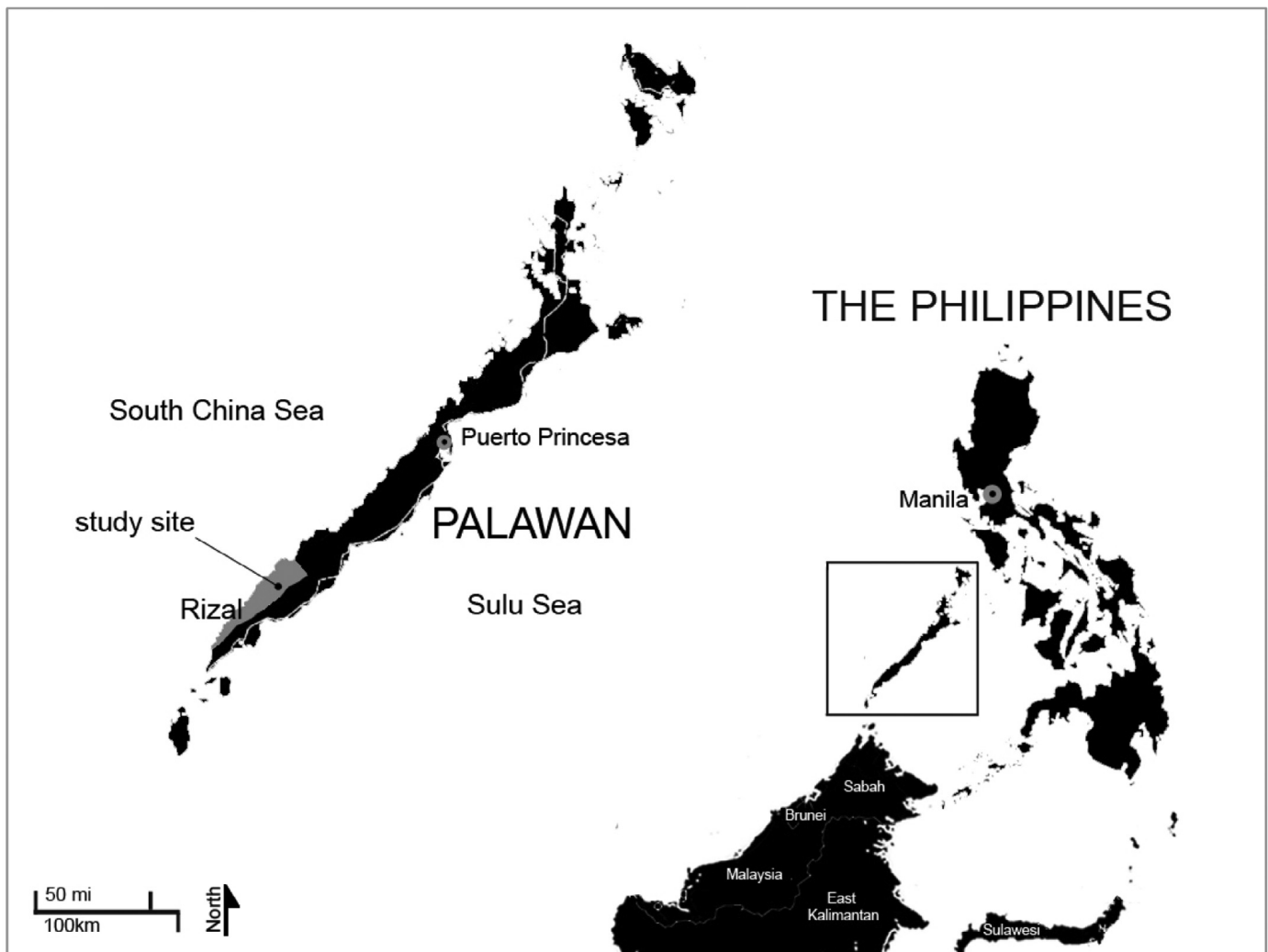


Fig. 1. Map of the Philippines and Palawan.
Source: Map by author.

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