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### Remapping New Guinea

New Guinea is one of the ur-sites for the production of anthropological and ecological knowledge. From Alfred Russel Wallace through Jared Diamond, the staggering biological and cultural diversity of the island has been presented as a function of its unique natural qualities. Works by the likes of Marilyn Strathern and Aletta Biersack have challenged this reductionist formula, drawing attention to the dialectical relationship between nature and culture. These critical works have done much to situate accounts of New Guinea's nature within the sociohistorical context of its production. And yet they have been less effective at displacing notions of New Guinea as a self-contained parable of evolutionary outcomes that dominate popular notions of the island. Inhabitants of the island, both human and nonhuman, remain compelled to articulate their claims according to the familiar axes of nature and culture used to locate New Guinea within the popular imagination. It is on this terrain that inhabitants of New Guinea are compelled to articulate themselves to researchers, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and other "outsiders." In order to become subjects of political concern, the people, plants, and animals of New Guinea must render themselves legible within this grid of intelligibility used to produce them as objects of research.

None of these problems are reasons *not* to write about New Guinea. Instead, they inform a daunting political and intellectual agenda for research that is simultaneously alert to the historical and social processes through which New Guinea has been produced as an object of research and the forms of knowledge and power that construction makes possible (Wainwright 2005). Two books by Stuart Kirsch and Paige West take up this challenge. Both are grounded by long-running political commitments to the people with whom they have done their research. Kirsch's account draws from nearly two decades of political engagement with the Yonggom peoples' struggles with the devastating effects of the Ok Tedi mine and the arbitrary political division of the island into independent Papua New Guinea and Indonesian-controlled Irian Jaya. His use of the term "West Papua New Guinea" for "Irian Jaya" follows through on those commitments, positioning his work within long-running struggles for independence in which the subjects of his text are involved. West's text is informed by a similar depth of political commitment. Instead of fighting environmental destruction, however, her account engages a complex and overlapping set of efforts to preserve nature in the Crater Mountain Wildlife Management Area. Both

authors present richly detailed ethnographic accounts of the places where they have done their research, exploring the ways in which those places have been produced, contested, and maintained through multifaceted relations between human and nonhuman elements. Both use ethnography to make the voices of the people with whom they have lived and conducted research heard by a larger audience, fusing their respective political commitments with scholarly inquiry. Their situated accounts of conservation, mining, and political struggle challenge prevailing concepts and categories used to locate New Guinea. Their respective efforts raise thorny questions. What are the merits of “applied” or “activist” research with regard to transforming development practices? Of what relevance are they to on-the-ground political mobilizations? Under what conditions is it possible to call something “indigenous knowledge”? What does that knowledge contribute to how societies make sense of capitalism? Or does that knowledge, particularly when presented in terms of ethnography, simply provide a more nuanced understanding about how indigenous peoples are subjected to capitalism?

Both texts offer rewarding possibilities for engaging these questions, particularly with regard to their efforts to produce understandings of New Guinea that provide greater space for grasping the political stakes of the struggles they describe. In both accounts, New Guinea emerges as a dense site of interconnections between villagers and capitalism, birds and conservationists, scientific inquiry and political struggle. Together they contribute to a political ecology attuned more to historical and geographical processes of exchange and contestation than to evolution and cultural isolates, providing a critical “vocabulary for describing, first of all, ecological variability and, second, the dynamics of those interchanges” (Biersack 2006, 25). The New Guinea(s) they describe come to life as sites that bind New York conservationists and transnational mining corporations with people living in seemingly remote and isolated places, supplanting the distance that underlies hegemonic understandings of that relationship with intricate, ethnographic accounts of their mutual constitution. In this review, I situate both texts within recent works in political ecology through engaging their respective treatments of space and place. Building on both authors’ efforts to describe “New Guinea” as a space that has been historically constructed, this review addresses the importance of historicizing their respective inquiries by assessing their contributions to political ecology.

### **Looking at Birds-of-Paradise: Critical Ontologies of Nature**

The field of political ecology today confronts a set of ontological challenges. While some critics have argued that the field has lost all sense of “ecology”

and “politics” as discrete topics of inquiry, others have set about questioning the stability of those terms by way of getting at underlying assumptions about the difference between nature and society. Both Kirsch and West grapple with this latter question as a fundamental part of their respective efforts to question the assumptions used to locate New Guinea within the Western imagination. This approach raises a fundamentally ontological set of questions about how the context for studies in political ecology is defined. The facts of New Guinean nature and culture are not to be found in scholarly accounts and on maps. Rather, both authors draw attention to the materiality of New Guinea through the singularity of the moment in which it is experienced and interpreted in terms of systematic “worldview.” New Guinea is constantly in a state of becoming, a space constructed through interactions between its remarkable fauna and conservationists, between indigenous peoples and researchers. By treating the facts not as they are but in terms of how they have come to be, both texts elaborate a critical ontology that interlaces dominant understandings of New Guinea with possibilities for thinking otherwise. In contrast with more explicitly postcolonial approaches to this task that focus on discourse and texts, Kirsch and West ground their accounts in empirical observations as a means to introduce alternative interpretations of familiar objects. In both texts, empiricism provides a material basis for bringing other possible relationships and ways of being into view.

Intriguingly, birds-of-paradise figure prominently in the introductions of both texts. The birds’ fame is not unwarranted. Their iridescent plumage and elaborate mating displays are striking, creating a spectacle around which multiple perspectives converge, entangling disparate sets of social relations and blurring the distinction between human and nature. As objects of nature, birds-of-paradise have long been a focus of Euro-American imagination. By Kirsch’s account, this fascination traces back to 1522, when the only ship to survive the Magellan voyage returned bearing five skins of the bird and a cargo of cloves (Kirsch 2006: 28–29). So spectacular were the skins that they elicited three centuries’ worth of speculation, shaping European imaginations of the world. It was not until Alfred Wallace described the birds in their “natural habitat” in 1857 that more was known about their habits and traits. And yet, by then, as Kirsch argues, the bird had been so shaped by European imagination as to irredeemably shade any account of its natural history. As such, descriptions of the birds’ habits could only build on the fetish of its plumage, adding detail to an image of New Guinea already well established in the Euro-American geographical imagination. As Kirsch notes, specimens of the bird were assembled in metropolitan museums together with skulls from headhunting missions and

other artifacts compiled as evidence of New Guinea's primeval state of nature and culture (Kirsch 2006, 27).

Kirsch's attempt to challenge that geographical imagination casts the birds as mediating relationships between the Yonggom and Euro-Americans, drawing on Yonggom understandings of the bird as a powerful historical agent. Two images are contrasted. The first is an advertisement from a 1912 British women's fashion magazine showing a woman wearing a hat adorned with yellow bird-of-paradise plumes. The second is a 1989 photo by the author of two Yonggom men preparing for a *yok* performance in which they will effectively become the bird, adorning themselves with feather and body paint before performing a dance that mimics the birds' elaborate courtship display. The reader is invited to see in these juxtaposed images the uses of birds-of-paradise for "comparable forms of self-decoration." These images, the text argues, were never before juxtaposed, their deliberate separation perpetuating "assumptions about cultural difference, geographic distance and historical independence that remain central to Euro-American imagination of New Guinea" (Kirsch 2006, 37). This point is further drawn in contrast to the ways in which the bird is a historical actor "by eliciting Euro-American interests in science, and later in fashion and commerce, birds of paradise attracted outsiders to the region and mediated their interactions with the Yonggom" (Kirsch 2006, 54). The text's claim to present a "reverse anthropology" hinges on these two related points. First, we are asked to see in the birds an embedded set of social relations obscured by their fetishization as an object of scientific study and fashion. Second, we are asked to see them as agents themselves, engaging in a running debate about the agency of nature spurred on by the late Val Plumwood, among others (Head 2007). This second point is a key aspect of Yonggom analysis, engaging the nonhuman as historical actors. Following on the book's claim to use "indigenous analysis" to challenge anthropological categories and concepts and open up new political possibilities, seeing the birds as agents opens up a rich realm of communication between the human and nonhuman that structures Yonggom knowledge.

West also enlists birds-of-paradise to introduce her text. In her account, the bird-of-paradise acts as an object whose movement helps both constitute and mediate complex social networks. The bird-of-paradise in her text appears not on women's hats or on the bodies of highland dancers but instead in a Madison Avenue storefront and on the pages of *The New Yorker* magazine. Like Kirsch, she describes how in each appearance the bird is abstracted from the relationships that brought it to New York. At the same time, the images are used to bring New Guinea, as it were, to New York, inserting it into the daily life of the metropolis as a commodity.

The juxtaposition is well captured in *The New Yorker* article that describes a reception hosted at a posh midtown Manhattan hotel by Wildlife Conservation International, a part of the New York Zoological Society (now better known as the Wildlife Conservation Society). The short article introduces the reader to “Wildlife Conservation International, the island of New Guinea, birds of paradise, and an ethnolinguistic group known as ‘the Gimi’” through a narrative of an invitation to a talk on conservation efforts in Papua New Guinea (West 2006, 1). The juxtaposition that West is after appears in the text of the invitation quoted in the article, counterposing the scientific observation of the bird-of-paradise as “one of the last of a spectacular species” with a local Gimi guide’s vision of “the spirit of his ancestor.” Where Kirsch uses his juxtaposition of images to bring a set of hidden exchange relations into view, West uses the juxtaposition to introduce the tangled connections between “New York and New Guinea, conservation and development, and birds of paradise and commodities” (West 2006, 4). West’s focus on relationships introduces a sophisticated Marxist analysis as opposed to a distinctly indigenous form, introducing her approach to understanding the production of space through social relations.

Their respective uses of birds-of-paradise serves at least two important analytical and methodological purposes that contribute to a critical ontology. First, it blurs the distinction between nature and culture, presenting the relationship between people and birds as an open-ended zone of cognition. This blurring is not entirely new. With specific reference to birds-of-paradise, Jared Diamond characterizes their showy displays as a form of risky behavior akin to adolescent human boys’ “fast driving or consuming danger drugs” in order to attract mates (Diamond 1992, 199).<sup>1</sup> This sort of functionalism—behavior as function of biological imperatives—defines the kind of sociobiology that New Guinea is often used to illustrate. Still, Kirsch draws a similar connection between Yonggom dancers and metropolitan women in the early twentieth century, claiming that they all use “the sublime beauty of the plumes and the rhythmic nature of the dance to contribute to the desired effect of seduction” (Kirsch 2006, 37). Unlike Diamond, Kirsch is quick to point out that this attraction is not biologically determined. Instead, the specific uses of the plumes by birds and people varies speaks to different notions of beauty and social relations (Kirsch 2006: 226–27n17,18). In contrast with Diamond’s functionalism, Kirsch presents us with an open-ended set of performances whose interpretation helps constitute the difference in relationships between Yonggom, metropolitan society, and birds. Ecology here characterizes a range of interactions between nature and culture, describing a set of emergent properties

rather than providing an explanation of their differences. In West's account, ecology plays a similar role in bringing together a seemingly disparate set of political elements rather than providing a rationale for their alignment.

This approach breaks with the "prehistoric ontology of modernity" that draws a hard and fast distinction between nature and culture (Raffles 2002, 209n9). Put differently, if objects of study are historically produced then the study of their constitution must also historicize the forms of inquiry that they have made possible (Biersack 2006, 19; Wainwright 2005). This critical ontological approach avoids the circularity of arguments that political ecology is neither sufficiently political nor ecological by raising key questions about how the "political" and the "ecological" are mutually constituted as categories of analysis. Instead of seeking out a definitive definition of either, this approach draws attention to the interplay between categories, advancing a relational approach that remains materially grounded (Raffles 2002; Braun 2002; Kosek 2006). The historical constitution of "New Guinea," "the Highlands," "wildlife management areas," and the "forest" as spaces must therefore be accounted for. Failure to do so concedes the most fundamental point of contention in struggles over resources, namely, where they occur, as geographer Joel Wainwright notes elsewhere. Like "nature" and "culture," "space is a problem to be explained, and not a scale of analysis to be embraced" (Wainwright 2005, 1034). West takes this task up through engaging debates in geography about the "production of space" described below. Reading conservation as development, West demonstrates how the objects targeted by conservation are constituted through interactions between villagers, conservationists, researchers, and state officials. Without denying the materiality of the nature constituted through those interactions, West's analysis is not empirically confined. By showing how nature is multiply produced and contested, she illustrates the diversity of ways in which "nature" comes into being relationally through interactions between humans and nonhumans alike. Her analysis rejects any approach to conservation (or development) that takes nature as a fixed category whose boundaries can be neatly demarcated and instead forces an engagement with how those practices bring a heterogeneous array of natures into being (Braun 2008).

Kirsch's account takes a different route to rethinking nature that turns to practices and concepts that people in a given locale use to make sense of nature. Like West, his is also a relational approach, reviving a line of inquiry that traces back to similarly themed works in environmental anthropology. Norman Whitten's (1985) *Sicuanga Runa* and Phillippe Descola's (1996) *Spears of Twilight* come to mind for their earlier attempts to describe indigenous understandings of the environment that exceed Euro-American

notions of “nature” as the basis for far-reaching reconsiderations of development and conservation. Kirsch’s text compellingly returns to that question, here revived as the basis for understanding how Yonggom people perceive of and engage with the transformations brought about by the Ok Tedi Mine. The steady stream of sediment spewed forth by the mine is thus cast in terms of its effects on a nature that is always already profoundly formed by Yonggom practices.

Taking this critical ontological approach is tricky business, particularly when it comes to such foundational categories as nature and culture. Too often, a critical approach to one becomes overly reliant on an uncritical use of the other. If the sociobiologists have been too quick to reduce culture to a function of nature, approaches to nature as socially constructed are no less prone to making equally reductive arguments about the importance of culture. Kirsch’s claim to doing a “reverse anthropology” attempts to rectify this tendency by exploring how mining has both affected Yonggom peoples’ conception of the world and transformed it. This approach importantly steps outside of conventional assessments of mining’s impacts on a previously defined environment, exploring how both concepts are constituted relationally by Yonggom people. For all its innovation, this approach replaces an essentialist understanding of nature with an equally essentialist notion of culture. Indigeneity is thus regarded as an already constituted category that exists prior to its entanglement with the Ok Tedi mine, to say nothing of its relationship to anthropology. This has the effect of packaging his rich descriptions of Yonggom practices within a category easily digested by anthropologically trained readers. The result is an all-too-familiar ontology that bounds Yonggom understanding in terms of familiar forms of difference. Seeing birds as agents requires tuning into the enchantment of place, the powers of sorcery, and mythical encounters—all themes explored in subsequent chapters of the book. Each denotes a recognizable form of indigeneity intended to both underscore the alterity of Yonggom understandings and render them legible to a Western audience as indigenous peoples. Using sorcery, place, and myth to index Yonggom knowledge thus circumscribes analysis within the familiar contours of indigeneity. The strength of Kirsch’s argument for seeing birds-of-paradise as historical agents is thus structured according to all-too-familiar understandings of indigenous knowledge, with the effect—most likely unintended—of giving the bird’s agency outside the structure of Yonggom understandings. The effect is one of opening the door to a different understanding of nature, only to constrain it by an eminently colonial distinction—indigeneity—that is no less firmly embedded in the constitution of modernity.

West's use of the birds-of-paradise strikes a different tone here, attending to the spatial and temporal coconstitution of nature and culture that are at once resolutely material and relational (Raffles 2002, 209n9). Her reluctance to assign the birds' agency harks back to a dialectical approach to nature and culture that avoids the oppositional structure that humanist approaches often invoke. West studiously avoids assigning "the Gimi" the stability of meaning that their identification as indigenous peoples would afford. One might see this as undermining any chance of Gimi villagers presenting themselves as "indigenous" in the terms that Kirsch sets forth. This is a possible reading, though it is arguably a limited one. For part of what is at stake is precisely a matter of ontology, of seeing "the Gimi" not as bounded by familiar markers of difference but rather as a heterogeneous entity that is always in the process of becoming. West effects a similarly destabilizing move on notions of the "political" and the "ecological," blurring the boundaries between nature and culture without falling back into the crude functionalism that both she and Kirsch oppose. At the same time, even a dialectical approach assigns a certain stability to the concepts that describe its poles. The dialectic codifies a struggle, fashioning from its confrontation a logic that promises a "reconciled truth" and the constitution of a universal human subject (Foucault 2003: 58–59). Kirsch's emphasis on indigenous modes of analysis is instructive insofar as it presents an alternative metaphysics grounded in Yonggom experience and analysis. A critical ontology does this, engaging the materiality of the world not as something that already exists but instead through its experience, opening up dynamic modes of cognition that allow for the development of alternative metaphysical frameworks. This kind of critical ontology, grounded at once in the material reality of birds, people, trees, and so forth and yet attuned to the very different ways in which they are experienced relationally, forms a cornerstone of a "critical natural history" (Raffles 2005). Such a task moves toward addressing "New Guinea" as a problematic of its own, a place constituted through multiple historical and spatial processes and thus never just a background for other kinds of activities.

### **Spectral Demarcations: Space, Place, and Scale**

The differences of approach between Kirsch and West are all the more notable in their respective treatments of space and place. Like Arturo Escobar (2001, 2009), Kirsch argues for a defense of place against assertions of Indonesian sovereignty and the encroachment of mining activity for entirely sensible political reasons. Building on the kind of critical ontology approach described above, the starting points for his accounts are material—a plume from a bird-of-paradise, a skull housed in a museum, a



wooden shield. Placed within the context of their production by Yonggom people, however, these empirical elements take on very different meanings, articulating what Kirsch describes as a “sense of place” revealed by ritual and magic (Kirsch 2006, 76). Like Escobar, Kirsch claims that an engagement with Yonggom sense of place provides the basis for critically reassessing the practice of anthropology in tandem with advancing the cause of social movements. In those struggles lies the possibility for alternative forms of power and knowledge. Kirsch’s insistence that we take those forms of knowledge on their own terms is one of the book’s strongest points.

Kirsch’s intention belies a familiar scholarly desire to integrate culturally specific forms of understanding with dominant debates within the discipline of anthropology through ethnography. Through explaining a set of explicitly cultural understandings, his application of indigenous modes of analysis seeks to contribute to our—a scholarly, Anglophone audience—understanding of Yonggom lives. This formulation bears a familiar assumption: through our better understanding of Yonggom analysis—especially where it disrupts more familiar anthropological understandings—we might better appreciate their struggles with modernity. As Kirsch would have it, there exists a certain continuity of thought and action that connects initiation ceremonies with taking the mining companies to court that pivots on Yonggom understandings of reciprocity. Kirsch’s description of how Yonggom desires for reciprocity with the mining company are “unrequited” is particularly compelling, elaborating on a series of creative reworkings of tradition that arise when Yonggom forms of analysis are pushed to their limits. And yet Kirsch’s sensitivity to indigenous modes of analysis here strains against the form of the text in a number of ways. He certainly elicits the sympathies of the reader for Yonggom struggles—who cannot be moved by descriptions of mine tailings literally burying peoples’ lives in mud? But how are we to reciprocate on that relationship if the translation performed by Kirsch heels to the familiar tug of explaining them to us, conveying through text a “sense of place” to his readers?

Though Kirsch works admirably to give Yonggom analysis its due, the text is framed according to a rather conventional understanding of politics. The introduction presents, in succession, sections on “The People,” “Senses of Place,” “The Refugees,” and “The Mine,” complete with a locator map. Each section introduces the characters in the book in rather conventional terms, categorizing them by ethnolinguistic grouping, demography, geology, and so on. This bow to convention is understandable. For Euro-American readers, it helps locate the study within a familiar epistemological frame. Such an effort is arguably necessary to delivering on the text’s claim to establish the importance of Yonggom analysis to anthropological debates.

In this regard, it complements his extensive work as a political ally of the people he studies, using his academic credentials to vouch for Yonggom political claims. Yet, by using Yonggom modes of analysis to subvert anthropological conventions, their alterity is reinscribed. In spite of Kirsch's claims to a novel approach, the text ultimately repeats many of the dilemmas found in earlier works in cultural ecology that made indigenous knowledge of the environment a central concern. Kirsch's effort to present a Yonggom worldview ultimately renders them vulnerable to being assimilated within Western desires to witness that alterity by way of becoming more tolerant and accepting of those differences. For all that is interesting about that alterity, at the end of the text it appears that it does precious little to make the Yonggom any less vulnerable to transnational mining companies and the military apparatus of the Indonesian state. Instead, the Yonggom are once again located according to the very axes of cultural difference and physical distance that Kirsch seeks to disrupt.

This is not to say that being indigenous is without meaning—Kirsch's political commitments inform his sense of the term's immediate utility to Yonggom people for rendering their claims legible before courts, international development agencies, and transnational activist networks. As a concept, indigeneity delimits the terrain in which both "traditional" and "modern" are mutually constituted as meaningful categories. Kirsch's argument about the importance of "indigenous modes of analysis" is well taken, but at some level it also limits engagement with what might be more properly termed *Yonggom* forms of analysis. Indeed, some of the more compelling parts of his book are those that engage the ways in which Yonggom forms of analysis fail to be sufficiently "indigenous," circumscribing the effectiveness of certain political strategies. Kirsch addresses this gap in a passage describing Yonggom interpretations of bringing claims for compensation against the mining company. The legal strategy of taking the mining company to court productively interweaves state-sanctioned forms of justice with Yonggom emphasis on reciprocity, allowing the Yonggom to cast the mining company as a single entity that can be addressed through relations of reciprocity. That those efforts go "unrequited," as Kirsch notes, underscores Yonggom peoples' distinctive interpretation of the events, leading them to bring more compensatory claims that effectively curtail mining activity. And yet at the same time, those claims have made the Yonggom vulnerable to challenges that they care more about money than about the land in question, a charge that effectively questions the legitimacy of their indigeneity. Equating Yonggom identity with being indigenous confuses a key distinction between the literal use of the term to describe a historically and geographically situated form of knowledge and

its more conventional use to describe a broader engagement with colonialism. Kirsch addresses the question of how “Yonggom” identity relationally comes into being too briefly in his account of identity formation among the Yonggom-speaking Muyu “refugees” from Indonesian-controlled Irian Jaya. Rather than assuming the structural stability of indigeneity as a means of identifying differences, it seems to me that the political relevance of the term has to be taken up in light of how its meaning is produced. This approach has to begin with a critique of indigeneity’s “sedentary metaphysics” expressed in terms of an essential link to place and instead engage with how the space of indigeneity is constituted (Li 2000).

This tension should be familiar to anyone who has attempted a similar balance between political engagement, scholarly critique, and intimate relations with the erstwhile subjects of study (Hale 2006). In spite of the text’s attempt to have readers see and think otherwise, the framing effectively subverts the ensuing analysis to the familiar binary of inside/outside. It makes it possible for a reader to appreciate Yonggom struggles in terms of the defense of place. But it also limits Kirsch’s efforts to understand Yonggom struggles in relational terms by hewing closely to a kind of meta-structure of inside/outside. This shortcoming is hardly unique to Kirsch’s text. Geographers have devoted much ink to dissecting the analytical salience of place—but those debates are not referenced here. Reading more geographers is not the solution to this dilemma (why replicate disciplinary divides?). Rather, the point is to open up a more ecumenical, even antidisciplinary, discussion of place (among other things).

The treatment of space in West’s text provides a striking contrast. In her case, place is not something whose meaning can be sensed, nor is it unilaterally made by any single party. Rather, place serves as a location where a “complex constellation of social relations intersect,” to borrow Doreen Massey’s turn of phrase. West does not engage Massey directly in the text, but her ethnography of conservation in the Crater Mountain Wildlife Management Area elaborates Massey’s call for a “progressive sense of place” adequate to grasping the translocal qualities of the relationships described *and* contributing to an understanding of how “place” can be a political project (Massey 1994: 151–52). Massey’s arguments draw critically on Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) notion of space as socially produced, a concept that West demonstrates (also drawing on Lefebvre) through her descriptions of how Gimi villagers, NGOs, research scientists, and state officials, among others, have produced the Crater Mountain Wildlife Management Area through their complex and often unruly interactions. West also importantly extends her inquiry to include relationships with nonhumans. In West’s account, there is no inherent, endogenous Gimi understanding of

place that defines the essence of what Crater Mountain is (or ought to be). Rather, that meaning is defined *relationally* through *processes* that draw together *multiple* identities and histories. The uniqueness of Crater Mountain as a place derives *from* these interactions as opposed to deriving from its inherent qualities. There is no inside of these interactions that is not simultaneously vulnerable to being pushed outside and excluded from those interactions. The discussion of Harpy Eagle conservation efforts in Chapter 6 compellingly makes this point. Like Kirsch, West gives ample time to Gimi modes of analysis, introducing the eagle to us through its relationships with villagers. Conservationists in turn rely on the intimate relationships between individual villagers and the birds to locate nests and target areas for special management that ultimately threaten villagers' relationships with the bird, turning it into a commodity whose symbolic value as an icon of the forest displaces villagers' ability to maintain their own relationships with the bird. There is no essential meaning of place—as forest, as eagle habitat, or even as village territory—to be defended here. West's emphasis on the relationships between eagles, villagers, and researchers, among others, underscores how space is produced through the interaction of multiple, contested notions of nature and culture.

Part of the difference between West's and Kirsch's accounts can be attributed to the very different political situations in which they are intervening. The Ok Tedi and Fly River basins are undergoing a process of radical physical transformation such that the possibilities for sustaining Yonggom livelihoods, to say nothing of birds-of-paradise, sago palms, and other nonhuman life forms, are severely constrained if not altogether annihilated. By contrast, the Crater Mountain Wildlife Management Area remains a place of "pure possibility." That is not to say that those relationships (and the potential they represent) are not vulnerable to displacement and disruption—they are. But it is to say that the threats are less catastrophic and thus leave open the possibilities for engaging creatively in processes of place making as West sees herself doing that are much more constrained in Kirsch's case. But West's account does offer a more nuanced attention to place as a political project through its emphasis on relationality that leaves ample room for assessing how relations to capitalism, the West, nature, and so on will vary considerably from place to place.

This leaves a number of questions unanswered, particularly with regard to space. Both Kirsch and West describe colonized spaces of nature and culture as multiply contested. However, neither author does much with the possibility of multiple spatialities that intersect and overlap. As described above, Kirsch's emphasis on Yonggom modes of analysis to a certain extent reinscribes the familiar binary between indigenous and modern identities in space. West more directly engages multiplicity through her refusal to

draw such distinctions, particularly when it comes to matters of time. She employs multiple tenses throughout the book to “illustrate different understandings and experiences of the past, the present, and the future to show that in daily life there is a constant slippage between the past, present, and future in both discourses and actions” (West 2006, 255). This is smart textual strategy. But when it comes to space, West is much more complacent with the notions of local, regional, and global scales. Her treatment of scale as an object of inquiry rather than as a problem to be explained is puzzling. In her initial discussion of scale, she acknowledges that Maimafu villagers do not see these scales as “vertical or all encompassing” before going on to say that villagers “‘jump scale’ all the time” (West 2006, 10). The phrase “jumping scale” comes from geographer Neil Smith (1992). West uses it here uncritically, without regard to critiques of the concept that call into question its production and ontological assumptions (Brenner 2001; Marston et al. 2005). In spite of her claims to deliver a multiscaled and multisited ethnography cognizant of the “agency at or within each scale,” it remains a book that is very much about Papua New Guinea as particular scale of analysis. A series of locator maps in the introduction reinforces this impression. In the maps, Crater Mountain Wildlife Management Area is depicted as nested within a Papua New Guinea that in turn floats in isolation surrounded by a grayscale sea. (Curiously, Irian Jaya/West Papua New Guinea is not depicted in the map at all, its would-be location depicted as the same color as the surrounding sea.) The text concedes a certain critical realism that runs counter to its efforts to critique how it is that Papua New Guinea becomes an object of research.

### **Ideas of Order: Ethnography**

This raises one final point about both texts. Is ethnography up to the task of accomplishing the tasks set forth in each book? For all their respective critiques of capital and nature as dominant terms that obfuscate relations that are far from monolithic, does not culture—*ethnos*—offer similar cover? Do ethnographies by definition make culture into a system, producing their own forms of reason and authority as well as the objects of their inquiry? Is there a way to engage with the materiality of a given locale without presenting it nomothetically? Hugh Raffles’s (2002) magnificent *In Amazonia* is one example of how new forms of analysis require new genres of writing. Michael Taussig’s corpus charts a similar path. One might counter that neither Taussig’s nor Raffle’s works are as *politically* effective in the sense that West’s and Kirsch’s works are. And yet shouldn’t the task of critical studies of this sort be precisely to question our notion of what the political is?

Both Kirsch and West are clear about their motivations for writing ethnographies. For both, it represents an effort to carry forward the intimate entanglements of field research into scholarly production, making the relational qualities of knowledge production the central focus of their accounts. The gift of a shield and a *bilum* in Kirsch's and West's respective accounts embodies the kind of relationality that they seek to foreground in their texts. In Kirsch's case, the shield presented to him as a gift by villagers bears a head carved in his likeness. Initially frustrated by this feature as detracting from the authenticity of the shield as an artifact, Kirsch saws off the head of the shield in an act that mimics colonial tropes of tribal head-hunting. Kirsch later rejoins the head with the shield, using it as an object that "conveys the message that we [anthropologist and villagers] are mutually a part of each others' lives" (Kirsch 2006, 53). In a similar fashion, West narrates a woman's gifting of a *bilum* to her. Simultaneously imbued with the initiation rites for women and value as commodity for sale to tourists, West reads the gift of the *bilum* first in terms of its Gimi significance as extending the relationship between mother and soon to be married daughter. It is only later when men from the village demand the return of the *bilum* for violating the terms of producing them for sale to tourists that West is forced to reconsider. Like Kirsch's shield, West's *bilum* becomes a kind of boundary object on which multiple meanings and social relations inflect. In ethnographic terms, their respective conclusions are eloquent if not overdetermined. What else can a gift be if not the materialization of an exchange relationship? And yet by locating both objects within a systematic accounting of exchange relationships, what other possibilities are foreclosed? Might not both gifts have also been about appropriating the symbolic power of the outside anthropologists into their villagers' forms of analysis and power? For the reader, this is a question without an answer. At the same time, it reproduces the notion that a "native point of view" always includes intellectuals who would interpret it as such. This dynamic is founded on a relationship that takes culture as something ontologically given and there to be studied by anthropologists, as much as it generates intellectuals who reflect on that exchange. This is what ethnography makes possible, but at what point does ethnography as a form of representation and genre of writing preclude other forms of critique? Obviously, I am in no position to pronounce whether the respective frameworks and disciplinary traditions employed by these two texts are sufficient for challenging the conventions that they seek to displace. What both texts do accomplish—and here West's book is much better read—is to line out some of the difficulties of trying to both render a text legible within its disciplinary grid of intelligibility *and* push readers to think of the those categories otherwise.

### Conclusion

Both Kirsch and West have produced fine pieces of work that are admirable in many ways. The level of detail, conceptual, and methodological innovation in both texts deserves to be widely engaged. At yet at the same time, both works present the reader with considerable uncertainty, standing with one foot firmly planted in the intellectual debates that they speak to while asking the reader to see the possibilities for thinking (and being) otherwise. Can those possibilities be grasped with novel interpretations that still hew to familiar notions of place, cultural difference, space, and environment? Or do they require new categories and concepts of their own? The post-colonialists have argued affirmatively in the case of this last question, drawing attention to the ways in which words shape understandings of the world that invariably have material consequences. The task, in other words, is less about fleshing out the details of understanding in terms of inescapably colonial categories of indigeneity and nature than it is about charting the contours of those categories, taking stock of their constraints and possibilities. Setting aside the need to define such terms makes it possible to grasp, both intellectually and politically, the spatially and temporally dynamic ways in which those categories are constituted, contested, and experienced. Both Kirsch and West have made serious contributions to this project. Read together, their contrasting analytics make for a rewarding exchange that signals their respective contributions to the field of political ecology.

### NOTE

1. See Louis Proyect's commentary on Diamond and sociobiology at <http://louisproyect.wordpress.com/2009/05/12/jared-diamond-the-new-yorker-magazine-and-blood-feuds-in-png-conclusion> (accessed October 1, 2009).

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### ***Reverse Anthropology Redux***

I first went to Papua New Guinea with an interest in questions of meaning, but by the time I returned, such concerns had been eclipsed by power in anthropological discourse. Writing about the West Papuan refugee crisis and working with the Yonggom on their campaign against the Ok Tedi mine pushed me to consider the relationship between meaning and power. I wanted to know whether culture still mattered in the context of such great power disparities. Did the rituals, myth, and magic through which the Yonggom view daily life and social relations have any bearing on these issues? Did their understandings of the world, and more importantly, their