Troubled landscapes, troubling anthropology:
Co-presence, necessity, and the making of ethnographic knowledge
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One humid, windless afternoon in 2010, in a village four hours' trek from the nearest road, I found myself sitting with a Bidayuh friend indulging in that classic anthropological speciality: a good bitch. I had arrived at Emmi's house hot, bothered, and sunburnt, having walked from another village in the midday heat, past slopes of felled trees, bamboo stumps, and other vegetation that used to shelter the path. Emmi told me that all these had come down as part of an ongoing 'biomass clearance' exercise: the latest stage of a dam-construction project that would ultimately flood most of her village. 'It's happening everywhere,' she said. 'They got a "contract" from the government to cut down the trees to prepare the land for inundation. They're felling the ones over there next week. I can't even get to my farm to plant corn because of the logs blocking the way!'

Still irritable and basking in relief and indignation, I happily grumbled away with Emmi as we snacked on fruit from her garden. But suddenly, she stopped talking and waved at me to be quiet as her eyes darted to the shuttered windows. Caught mid-sentence, I instinctively ducked out of sight as we heard voices and footsteps crunching down the path. A small band of men carrying machetes and chainsaws were strolling to the village head's house for a break from tree-felling. 'They', it turned out, were people from an uphill village whose knowledge of the local terrain and ownership patterns government officials were exploiting to carry out this 'biomass clearance'. Over the last few years, their support for the resettlement scheme associated with the dam project had put them at odds with Emmi's household—one of nearly forty actively opposing the whole affair. Although I was on civil terms with the passing group, Emmi seemed to think that my presence in her house would somehow be damaging or compromising—to whom, I wasn't sure. And so, over the next couple of hours, I bobbed up and down like a jack-in-the-box depending on who was walking past, both of us having a giggling fit each time I resurfaced. Not exactly how I had imagined conducting myself as a professional anthropologist!

Such jack-in-the-box moments—comic, awkward, or just plain awful—will be familiar to many anthropologists. But rather than brushing mine off as a momentary blip, I want to use it as an entrée into this article's key theme: the problem of co-presence in anthropology. Now, by co-presence, I do not simply mean co-location—that is, being physically in the same place at the same time—although, as Beaulieu (2010:454) notes, this is often what the notion of 'going into the field' evokes. Emmi and I were a few feet away from the tree-felling group, but this did not give rise to an unproblematic co-presence, the establishment of which I sought to deny by ducking from sight. At the same time, I do not wish to swing in the other direction and liberate co-presence from its material moorings—as have some ethnographers of science, technology and digital media (e.g. Baldassar 2008; Beaulieu 2010)—or regard it, as Fabian (2006) and Pina-Cabral (2013) do, as a primarily intersubjective, communicative act between ethnographers and their subjects. Instead, I shall tack a path between these approaches and treat co-presence as an inescapably relational and often ephemeral condition that arises when various entities come together and act on each other to produce social (though not necessarily sociable) effects.

The notion of 'entities' that I deploy here is deliberately expansive and underdetermined. More placeholder than prescription, this category could include anything from Euro-American notions of persons, things, and time to the spirits, transformative winds (*barui*), and animate

places that populate the hills where Emmi lives. What matters, as I shall argue, are the ways in which the specific characters, affordances, or preoccupations of these entities are 'animate[d]' (Basso 1996:107) in particular moments and configurations, thus turning them into *presences* that make themselves felt in the wider milieu, and that relate to, shape, and even constitute other presences. In my fieldsite, these interactions have given rise not to a romantic 'relational ontology'—which some scholars (e.g. Ingold 2006; Árnarson et al 2012), following an earlier tradition of phenomenological anthropology (e.g. Feld and Basso 1996; Jackson 1996; Tilley 1994), have recently held up as an antidote to the stultifying Cartesianism of Western thought— but to a fraught, deeply politicized situation in which co-presence itself has become a complex and evolving problem.

My ethnographic focus is what I call a troubled landscape in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo: a lush, hilly region that has been progressively transformed in recent years by the construction of a new dam designed to boost the capital city's water supply. Nestled in its upper reaches, only accessible on foot, are four small Bidayuh villages that were earmarked from the beginning for resettlement to a new government-built township along the road. This project has been plagued by glitches and controversies, including disputes over land compensation, an anti-resettlement legal case (of which Emmi's family is part), and delays in the acquisition and construction of the resettlement site. The affected villagers are deeply split by the project, with many households embracing resettlement, a significant minority opposing it, and everyone else shuttling in between. Meanwhile, the area has become a battleground over which human rights NGOs and opposition politicians trade insults with the ruling coalition. Although the dam has been ready for impoundment since 2011, it has lain unused due to holdups in the resettlement scheme (which began rather patchily in December 2013) and the lingering presence of villagers in the inundation zone. Cumulatively, these developments have left the affected communities living in a state of suspension, on the verge or in the process of displacement, for several years now.

Predictably, this tense, shifting space has been both an anthropological dream and a complete nightmare. Undertaken since 2007, my fieldwork in this area has been beset with complications: with mistrust, misunderstandings, hazardous journeys, dispersing populations, awkward encounters, immobility, too much mobility. Crucially, however, many of these issues have not been mine alone but run through the very fabric of life in these hills, enfolding those who live and move within them in an increasingly troubled space. In this respect, my ethnographic encounters cannot be bracketed off from the larger material and relational field of which they are part, but must, rather, be understood as contiguous with the other forms of co-presence that exist within and beyond it. As I shall try to show, ethnographic co-presence in this context is not simply a neutral feature of being 'in the field', nor an always productive 'interactive accomplishment' (Beaulieu 2010:457) between ethnographers and their subjects, but a component of anthropological knowledge-making that needs to be interrogated and problematized.

In the following pages, I shall flesh out my argument by exploring various forms and eruptions of co-presence that have shaped both the area around the dam and the fieldwork that I have conducted in it. On one level, I seek simply to portray life in a landscape that has literally been moving beneath its inhabitants' feet. But this article has another broader, more reflexive interest. In laying bare the shared spaces and conundrums through which ethnography and anthropological knowledge-making necessarily unfold, I also aim to tackle one of the discipline's most foundational and contentious questions: what does it mean to 'take seriously'

the things that we study? And how, by extension, are ethnography and the ethnographer implicated in this project?

Such long-standing concerns may strike readers as familiar to the point of being banal. Over the last decade, however, they have been revitalized by debates surrounding what has loosely become known as the 'ontological turn', which propounds a particular ethnographically-inspired mode of 'taking seriously' as the only viable way to deal with anthropology's traditional stock-in-trade, alterity. The 'turn' has been heralded in certain quarters as a radically different, ethically superior kind of anthropology that opens up profound new theoretical and analytical possibilities. At its core lies an apparently laudable, uncontentious assertion: that ethnography, taken seriously, should be the wellspring of anthropological theorization and creativity. But what exactly does this entail? In the rest of my article, I shall address this question by sketching out a rather different vision of 'taking seriously' to that of the ontological turn—and more specifically, the particular recursive programme that has come to emblematize it. My aim here is not to dismiss ontological anthropology out of hand but to sound a cautionary note about its methodological and theoretical implications—and thus its advocates' tendency to extol its superiority as a template for good anthropology (while insisting that everyone else has got it wrong). In this respect, I also use the notion of co-presence to trouble the premises and effects of this highly influential trend, while offering alternative responses to the questions that it has helped to revive. Before moving on to my ethnography, then, I shall expound briefly on my concerns with this project.

The invulnerable ethnographer?

The last decade has seen mounting anthropological interest in the theoretical, methodological, and ethical possibilities presented by ontological methods and frameworks. Encompassing a considerable assortment of writings and approaches (see Costa and Fausto 2010; Salmond 2014; Scott 2013), this turn to ontology is fuelled by a dissatisfaction with anthropology's representationist frameworks, which are charged with reducing our subjects' discourses and concepts to culturally specific mis-renditions of a single (Euro-American) ontology (Viveiros de Castro 1998). In this capacity, representationalism is epistemologically and politically skewed in favour of the anthropologist, the arbiter of ontic reality, while simultaneously marginalizing the 'other' of ethnographic enquiry, whose voice can never be taken seriously. 'Ontologists' respond to this disparity by adopting a stance of 'true agnoticisim' (Nadasdy 2007:37) or 'purposeful naïveté' (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007:2), apprehending ethnographic phenomena, however bizarre or counterintuitive, on their own (ontic) terms—as they *are*—rather than 'explain[ing them] away' as mere cultural constructions (ibid.:1). This recuperative strategy demands a rejigging not of 'native exegesis' but of the anthropologist's own categories and preoccupations—an admission that 'our concepts … must, by definition, be inadequate to translate *different* ones' (ibid.:12; Holbraad 2012:246).

In recent years, one segment of this broad movement has gained increasing prominence and popularity, notably in Anglophone scholarship: a self-styled recursive programme that has issued the most manifesto-like calls for an 'ontological turn' in anthropology. Building on the analytically subversive meditations of Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2003), Strathern (1988) and Wagner (1981), this project is closely associated with Martin Holbraad and a number of his Cambridge-trained peers (e.g. Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007; Holbraad, Pedersen and Viveiros de Castro 2014; Pedersen 2011). Unlike approaches that treat ontologies as actual 'phenomena out there to be found' (Holbraad 2012:255), the recursive programme takes radical ontological difference—or more specifically, the ethnographer's *realization* of difference—as

the key to transforming anthropology's conceptual and analytical register(s). For its proponents, alterity is not an inherent property of 'otherness', but something that surfaces in the gaps between specific ethnographic phenomena and the anthropologist's conceptual arsenal. It is the experience of disjuncture between the two that precipitates anthropological invention, or what Holbraad calls 'ethnographically driven anthropological self-trumping' (2012:46).

In the last few years, this recursive programme has effectively become the face of 'the ontological turn' in anthropology, eliciting adulation, critique, and bafflement in equal measure. Rather than rehearse all the responses to it (see, e.g., Carrithers et al. 2010; Salmond 2014), I want to hone in on a curiously under-interrogated aspect of the recursive project: the place of ethnography and the ethnographer in the anthropological enterprise. Like other ontological approaches, the recursive programme claims a certain moral and analytical supremacy on the basis that it takes its subjects more seriously than other anthropologists, hopelessly ensnared as the latter are in Cartesian/representationist/constructionist/ethnocentric traps. Rather than falling back on such familiar (read: Euro-American) conceptual schema when confronted with inexplicable phenomena, ontologists begin instead by acknowledging 'their own conceptual inadequacy' (Holbraad 2012:247), then using this humbling (ibid.:259) revelatory moment to launch a process of ethnographically-inspired 'conceptual creation' (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007:15). Crucially, this exercise revolves around uncommon occurrences—those points when alterity is recognized—rather than a constant state of engagement with otherness. In this regard, recursive ontologists seek neither to paint holistic portraits of their 'fields' nor to fetishize alterity as an essential condition. Rather, their version of the ontological turn is 'a sustained theoretical experiment' (Pedersen 2012) built around radically unfamiliar ethnographic chunks valued primarily for their capacity to reconfigure anthropology's own concepts and theories.

In effect, I suggest, this move supplants the fleeting reflexivity that rendered alterity apparent in the field with a protracted process of recursive analysis and experimentation that its proponents seem to see as the very gist of anthropology. Here, the ethnographer is positioned as what Amiria Salmond calls a 'masterful figure of the artist or translator exercising creativity *upon* ethnographic materials, and assuming ownership and authority over their effects' (2014:179; see also Vigh and Sausdal 2014:50). She also points out, however, that this image simultaneously denies the ethnographer's vulnerabilities—to relational commitments, to native thinkers' and scholars' interventions, and indeed to the possibility of being herself transformed by those recursive anthropological conversations. For Salmond, the (inadvertent?) establishment of such ethnographic invulnerability actually 'inhibit[s] recursive ethnography's potential' (ibid.) by excluding the anthropologist from its transformative remit.

Although I share Salmond's analytical vexation, my concerns about the recursive programme lie on a more immediate plane. In producing this invulnerable master-figure, I argue, recursive strategies also encourage what Piers Vitebsky has (in conversation) called a process of 'anthropological involution', by progressively distancing certain singular ethnographic encounters from the wider relations and contingencies in which they are invariably embedded.[1] If the ethnographer's reflexive realisation of her own conceptual inadequacies offers a glimpse of a world beyond the immediacies of ethnographic encounter, the resultant recursive analysis erases that vision. In this 'ontographic process of purification' (Killick 2014), the only voice that we end up hearing is the ethnographer's, as the hum of other interactions, dilemmas, and messes fades into inconsequentiality. Assumed to be benevolent, reflexive, and benign, the anthropologist's only apparent flaw is initial (conceptual) ignorance. But once that is rectified,

she can get on with experimentation, conceptualization, and writing without, it would seem, needing to account for how her insights might also have been shaped—or distorted—by politics, misunderstandings, ambiguities, and other 'disruptive beings and things' (Bessire and Bond 2014:446) that populate not only anthropological fieldwork but also the broader context(s) in which it occurs.

In sum, the notion of 'taking seriously' that recursive ontologists espouse as the remedy to anthropology's current failings is one that starts and ends with the *ethnographer's* journey of epistemological self-discovery and development. Yet it is this very undertaking, I argue, that undermines their claim to privilege ethnography as the basis of anthropological knowledge-making and inventiveness. What is privileged instead are ethnographic segments that serve as 'conceptual trampoline[s]' (Vigh and Sausdal 2014:62) on which only anthropologists are allowed to play. By 'inviting the participation of certain kinds of natives'—those channelled by the ethnographer—and 'effectively excluding others' such as indigenous scholars or indeed other anthropologists (Salmond 2014:179), this involutionary move arguably ends up reinstating the very epistemological supremacy that it claims to challenge. Ultimately, this project of taking ethnography seriously seems to contribute less to ontologists' stated aim of promoting the 'ontological self-determination of the world's peoples' (Viveiros de Castro 2003:18) than to the 'academic needs of ontographers' (Vigh and Sausdal 2014:62) and their scholarly interlocutors.

It is here that we can wend our way towards the question of co-presence. If recursive ontologists exploit the power of ethnography by purifying their material into a series of 'explorations and experimentations' (Pedersen 2012), a focus on co-presence can, I suggest, shunt us in the opposite direction by keeping alive a sense of the wider relational field through which ethnography is generated—and in which it remains enmeshed. Attending to the complexities inherent in this field reveals a more complicated and often more troublesome relationship between ethnography, the ethnographer and the project of 'taking seriously' than the recursive programme, with its overwhelming emphasis on epistemological revelation, can account for. Crucially, rather than locating the nub of anthropology in the thought experiment of an invulnerable, relatively non-accountable ethnographer, the notion of co-presence underscores the ways in which anthropological knowledge is continually co-produced in discursive, social, material, and other ways, with its implications and effects often exceeding the ethnographer's competence and control. I shall expand on these points towards the end of the article. But first, some ethnography.

Landscapes of memory and morality

The new dam is located nearly two hours' drive from Sarawak's capital, Kuching. But road access ends at the site, and reaching the affected villages involves another few hours of walking through the hills across an undulating network of paths, slopes, and suspension bamboo bridges. In the shady damp coolness of the jungle, the whirr of cicadas and the rustle of foliage are as enveloping as the humidity. This is a physically encompassing space in which all travellers must engage in a constant choreography with each other, plants, stones, animals, spirits, the land, water, and the weather: balancing together on bridges, working with the terrain, watching out for snakes, replacing worn-out steps, and leaving markers to let others know of diversions ahead.

Such activities, which are underpinned by a hill-dwelling habitus much less pronounced in low-lying Bidayuh areas, reveal how my acquaintances share an intimate and sometimes precarious

relationship with *tanah* (the land), *tărun* (the interior jungle), *pu'tărun* (place-spirits), *dărŭd* (the hills), *piin* (water), *săbak* (the wind), and *ujen* (the rain), to cite some frequently-mentioned features. These entanglements are both an important basis and the very substance of social relations in this area, generating a distinctive form of co-presence that is shared not only by its inhabitants but also (potentially) by interested outsiders such as ethnographers, missionaries, and in-marrying spouses. As I later argue, there is a certain inescapability to these shared, visceral frames of experience that can be both productive and problematic. But first, let me guide your eye (Figure 1) to the slopes, trees, crops, and buildings that flank the jungle trails and populate the vistas that open up along the journey. These all belong to specific individuals, households, or villages, and cumulatively, they help to constitute what is known locally as *abong ta*—'our area'.

More than a physical landscape, *abong ta* is a constantly shifting spatial, social, and temporal field that my acquaintances view as uniquely theirs. Although its boundaries are not clearly fixed or defined, they map loosely onto the complex networks of histories, kin relations, and place-based genealogies that link the villages in this vicinity. Like many Bornean groups, Bidayuhs have always been sojourners. Village histories invariably take the form of a 'topogeny'—'[a]n ordered succession of place-names…analogous to the recitation of a genealogy' (Fox 2006:89)—that traces the migration of groups from their 'origin' villages in what is now Indonesian Borneo across the mountains over several generations. These place-based genealogies are jagged and erratic, punctuated by lengthy periods of settlement but also episodes of village fission and fusion precipitated by disputes, water shortages, land issues, and other factors. Every such movement engendered both differentiation and new relations, as villages with shared origins ('parents') became 'siblings' (*bimadis*) with specific rights and responsibilities to each other. In this way, their inhabitants have become embroiled in networks of kin- and place-based relations that range across space and time to include both living places and abandoned settlements.[2]

These histories and relations are recited in village genealogies by knowledgeable elders, but are, more importantly, instantiated in crops, trees, boundary markers, house posts, and bathing places, among other things. In this capacity, they are tangible reference points (a 'record', as one man, appropriating state-speak, put it) for those who move through the hills, helping to determine planting rights, access to old fruit trees and crops, inter-household obligations, and so on. Interlaced with events specific to local memory, such as suicides or memorable ceremonies, and distinctive features such as magically transformed rocks and bodies of water, these place-marks in the terrain are only dimly discernible and meaningless to outsiders, including Bidayuhs from elsewhere. But in *abong ta* they generate their own self-referential, field, serving as the very substance of memory, relatedness, and morality. As an elderly man put it after carefully outlining who he was related to and in which villages, '*patut dayak pu'an rais-i*'—people should know their own villages—because otherwise, how else would they know which marriages and funerals to attend and whose farms they should help to cultivate?

The upshot of all this is that simply moving through the hills is a 'place-making' (Basso 1996:5) act, constitutive of a form of co-presence that gathers up persons, places, kin relations and journeys, both past and present, within a single spatial, temporal, and moral network. As people walk through this landscape, they keep up a running commentary on their surroundings, pointing out current, past, and future owners of land, crops, and buildings, recent and anticipated developments in particular places, and asking questions about what they can and cannot see. What they are discussing are not simply farms, trees, and buildings, but artefacts of historical processes of movement, fission, and fusion: sets of relations in which other

households, villages, and possibly they themselves are implicated. These networks of presences, moreover, bear within them their own futurity: the anticipation that they too will eventually give rise to an ever-unfolding series of place-based transactions and relations.

In recent years, however, a different kind of futurity has entered the picture: the prospect (and now, experience) of displacement to a new area and the radical alteration of the hills that constitute *abong ta*. These days, official plot markers, abandoned fields, crumbling farm huts, and half-cleared land are simply the most tangible manifestations of a new regime of ownership defined by governmental surveys and compensation packages: one that leads not to further movement but to what is essentially a non-future under water. And it is to the troubling ramifications of this new futurity that I now want to turn. In the rest of this article I shall explore some problems of co-presence that have materialized in this landscape-on-the-move through two accounts of journeys at different stages of my fieldwork, during which time both the topography and my ethnographic relations, knowledge, and interests underwent various transformations. Together with my opening anecdote, they highlight the need to approach 'the field' as a temporal concept, forged not only by developments in situ but also by the ethnographer's own entrances and re-entrances into it (Dalsgaard and Nielsen 2013; Howell and Talle 2012).

December 2008

It's nearly 9 am and we're going to be late for the official ceremony at the community hall by the road. I've been walking through the jungle for three hours with about ten men—heads of some of the households involved in the anti-resettlement legal case. In consultation with their lawyer, they've decided to stage a protest against the resettlement scheme at this ceremony, at which a senior politician will dole out land compensation cheques to the affected households. Oblivious to this plan, I'd arrived at the ringleader's house the day before, only to be marshalled into editing some statements about their protest in case they're approached by reporters. As I was planning to return to town today, we elect to walk together to the ceremony—'though we'll pretend not to know you if we see you!' they wink, knowing my anxieties as a foreigner conducting research under a state government permit.

A light mist rises from the hills as we emerge from the jungle. To get to the road we must walk through the dam construction site, which was hewn out of the mountain range, thus cutting off the villagers' old walking route. Earlier plans to build a separate path skirting the site haven't materialized, and we're now walking across a barren ochre landscape, the incipient dam visible in the distance. Around the corner, a whole galaxy of smoking, thumping, drilling mechanical beasts is revealed: lorries, cement mixers, piledrivers, sections of giant pipe. The din is overpowering. As I wonder what the health and safety officers at university would think, my attention is drawn to a man on a cement silo. My companion is telling me about how an 'Indon'—an illegal worker from across the nearby Indonesian border—recently fell off a silo and smashed his head. As he had no identification papers, he was unceremoniously buried nearby. 'This has happened a few times,' he explains, adding that the Indons are the most troublesome of the foreign workers. Whereas the 'Chinamen' and 'Bangla[deshi]s' can be controlled because they can only come in and out through the airport, Indons cross the border whenever they want without a 'pass'.

We spend an uncomfortable eternity picking our way through the construction site, roundly ignored by the workers. As the site narrows into a rough 'road', we walk in a single file along

the hillside, hoping that the boulders overhead, held perilously in place by wire, don't tumble down. A number of Toyota Hiluxes cruise past. Sometimes their drivers give the villagers lifts, but these are filled with Bangladeshi or Chinese construction workers. Then we get lucky: a couple more Hiluxes approach and I flag one down. The Chinese driver looks nonplussed to see one of his 'own kind', as he tells me in Mandarin, with the villagers, and offers some of us a lift. We cover the remaining distance quickly—but towards the end of a long, bumpy stretch, the Hilux judders to a halt, its wheels stuck in muddy gloop. The driver says that we'd better get out, and we gratefully get our stuff and walk the remainder of the way. By the time we reach the village, we've got mud up to our calves.

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If abandoned villages and old fruit trees are artefacts of past migration and relation-making, the dam *is* the future of *abong ta*. To everyone's relief, a tarred road was laid through the construction site in 2010, enabling mini-vans and the cars that many villagers bought with their compensation money to drive up to the jungle trail. But the previous two-and-a-half years of walking through this hazardous space—which remain deeply imprinted on villagers' memories—brought home with unprecedented clarity the fact they were now living in a place that was being reshaped for a future without them.

During this period, people talked constantly about how awful it was to navigate the site. For them, the terrain seemed to have acquired a malign, aggressive energy of its own—as if its destructive capacities had spiralled out of control. Bidayuhs have long acknowledged that they live in a powerful and not always benign milieu: persons, spirits, flora and fauna, and the land do not co-exist as a matter of course, but are always potentially agentive, dangerous presences that can act on each other. Among them are various local spirits, from *pu'tărun*—a generalized life-force of the land—to two spirit maidens who travel along the river in their boat. But spirits are only one of many interpretive possibilities when accounting for what goes on in the hills: indeed, villagers just as often attribute developments to such factors as soil and water quality, rain, drought, Jesus' will,[3] 'global warming', and a vindictive or incompetent state.

The start of dam construction, however, introduced a slew of intractable and unpredictable presences to the area. In addition to experiencing some of these, I regularly heard stories about hair-raising walks past tractors and bulldozers and frightening near-misses with speeding lorries and falling rocks. As we trudged across vast, unsheltered stretches of earth, my companions would complain about how *măndam*—painful, sick-making—the sun was, and ask how the government could allow children to make this weekly trek to and from school in town. Further upstream, there would be observations about how the water had become so 'dirty' (*kais*)—a term with physical and moral implications—near the dam. Meanwhile, the workers themselves became moving fragments of this project. In 2009 a band of 'Banglas' strayed from their dormitories into one of the villages, raising fears that they would rape the women and cause trouble—although all they did was get drunk and fall asleep. The villagers told the construction company that if they saw any more workers in their area, they would cut off their heads and throw away the bodies.

The construction site and its fragments are merely the most conspicuous manifestation of the 'stunted temporality', to borrow Yael Navaro-Yashin's term, that now characterizes the area: the sense of 'being spatially enclosed and temporally in a limbo status'—not for 'an indefinite period' (2012:7), as for her Turkish Cypriot acquaintances, but for an indeterminate period with a definite watery end. This sensation has been exacerbated by the discrepancy between

the dam construction and resettlement timetables. Although the two were meant to proceed in tandem, the latter suffered numerous setbacks and only got (partially) underway in December 2013, three years after the bulk of dam construction ended. Consequently, those who lived in the area became increasingly torn between the demands and banal temporalities of everyday life and the transformations to the landscape, real and expected, that crept steadily from the construction site into the hills. In recent years, for example, villagers have debated whether to clear their slopes for rice farms given that things might be very different at harvest time in eight months. A more dramatic example can be found in the biomass clearance exercise mentioned earlier. Originally scheduled to take place shortly before inundation, when the villagers had already been moved, it ended up destroying the trees and bamboo that had previously sheltered the villagers' paths, leaving them at the mercy of the elements until the foliage began to grow back. Moreover, the hollow bamboo stumps left behind quickly became receptacles for rainwater, which in turn bred mosquitoes and caused an infestation in Emmi's village. With typical black humour, she and her friends remarked that since the government was not able to move them to the new site, it would just kill them with mosquitoes instead.

Similar jibes can be heard in other Bidayuh communities where there exists a similar mistrust of the Sarawakian government. Many rural Bidayuhs portray themselves as having been historically ruled by a succession of states: the private Brooke dynasty (1841-1946), the Japanese (World War II), the British Crown (1946-1963), and now the contemporary Malaysian government. However, whereas the Brookes and British are remembered as benevolent rulers who did not 'disturb' (*ngasu*) Bidayuhs' land and crops, the current Sarawakian government, which most Bidayuhs associate with Malaysia's dominant Malay-Muslim majority, is often described as neglectful, discriminatory, and avaricious: as wanting to 'eat' (*man*) Bidayuhs' land and grow rich from it. This threat has acquired a particular intensity and immediacy for my acquaintances affected by the dam. Their resentment has been further fanned by widespread rumours that once cleared, the hills around the reservoir will be gazetted as a national park to attract eco-tourists—to which one of my walking companions snorted, 'Oh, so they're going to cage *us* in a new village and let the *animals* run free on our land!'

Such mordant quips about mosquitoes and free-ranging animals reflect a wider and often visceral sense of being increasingly estranged from *abong ta* without having even moved away from it. Today, hewn-out hills, machines, felled trees, roving construction workers, and abandoned farms have all become new presences that disrupt earlier place-based forms of co-presence by literally cutting across and sometimes erasing the very land on which they were built. These changes have been accompanied by people's struggles to reimagine and reshape the land in the terms of the government's compensation regime. Consequently, landscapes that were once fairly reliable nodes through which persons, households, and villages could relate are now mired in uncertainty and suspicion, both of which have seeped into conversations on the move. Has the owner of that farm accepted compensation? Did he fiddle the boundaries he shared with his brother to get a better deal? That piece of communally-owned jungle has been signed away—but who acted on behalf of the village, and where's the money gone?

Recent developments have thus introduced new, troubling presences and forms of co-presence to *abong ta*: those between different camps of affected villagers in the present and the state-constructed landscape of the future. These presences make themselves felt in different ways— physically, socially, affectively, temporally, and imaginatively—such that the state, the dam, and visions of the future have all become part of the hills as agentive players with which my acquaintances have to engage. The upshot of all this is that the affected villagers are currently

undergoing a peculiar process of displacement: one that involves not only physical movement but 'a transformation in the ways in which they [are] related to place' (Kelly 2009:37). Confronted with the inexorable progress of the dam, the patchy loss of their lands, and the inevitability of inundation, it is increasingly *they* who are out of place.

Some people have responded to this disjuncture with a sort of indignant paralysis. But others have taken more concrete steps, thus causing three main demographic changes in the last few years. First, many households used their compensation money to buy houses in town rather than wait in the hills; some have now moved to the resettlement site. However, most have not fully abandoned their village houses or farms and fruit trees, and—until the waters arrive—continue to move about the affected area, albeit less regularly. Second, a smaller number of households in three villages (including those pursuing the legal case) have built, from scratch, new villages on their own land further up in the hills above the inundation zone. Although the legality and viability of these moves is unclear, the three new settlements are, at the time of writing, fairly well established. Finally, since December 2013, several more families have moved to the resettlement site in order to ensure the continuation of their children's education following the closure of the two government-run primary schools in the hills. All these processes, coupled with the landscape's topographical affordances, have generated some new problems.

July 2012

Emmi says that she doesn't like staying at home these days: it's 'lonely' and the lights don't work, so they just go to sleep after dinner. Like the other village households, Emmi's family relied on government-provided solar panels for a few hours of daily electricity. But theirs have now broken down, and the government is refusing to repair them, she says, because her family is legally challenging the resettlement scheme. Not that they're going to stay here much longer. Eighteen families have already moved half an hour's walk to the new site that they've been building uphill, and the rest have bought houses in town. Emmi's family is the last one left, and they too will move to the new village in a few months.

When the afternoon sun wanes, Emmi, my husband and I take a walk round the village. We can hear distant shouts of the twenty-odd students at the government primary school nearby. Attended by children from two villages, the school will carry on operating until resettlement takes place.[4] Pupils who still live in the hills either stay in dormitories or walk back and forth to school every day. Those whose families have moved to town, however, now stay with their mothers in their semi-abandoned village houses during the week. These buildings, like the others, have been stripped bare, but display odd traces of habitation: open doors, umbrellas, clothes drying, smoke wafting from hearths. Emmi acknowledges the women we meet but doesn't linger; in recent years relations between the pro- and anti-resettlement villagers have been strained. When the first compensation cheques were given out, she tells me, half the villagers moved to town. But some of them, including the village head who was rumoured to have sold off the community's land as his own, have since had to return because they were short of cash. 'They've all grown fat!' she whispers, as we walk past the village head's house. His door is open, and on the wall next to it flaps the Prime Minister's face on a yellowed election poster, telling people to vote the ruling party 'for better prosperity'.

Emmi returns to her house and we carry on walking around this unsettling space, neither a ruin nor a living village. Near the school, we watch pupils streak across the field to their parents, and meet a small band of teachers walking down to the road for the weekend. Among them is

Ganyo, who is from this village and until this year lived in a big house near the school. He's going back to his new place in town. He tells me he doesn't want to stay here, and that the people I'm visiting—'the group that's fighting the government!' interjects the school caretaker, from another Bidayuh village—are not thinking straight. They're backward; they're out of step with the wishes of the newer generation, he says. The conversation soon shifts, but I now feel that Ganyo, with whom I used to get on quite well, holds me complicit in what he sees as the selfish actions of Emmi's family.

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This now more-or-less-abandoned village is the one of the final products of the transformative process that began downstream and spread through the hills: an artefact of a projected future that haunts the (pre-inundation) present. Those who move about in it[5] are temporally, spatially, and socially oriented elsewhere: to the new village, a life in town, a new school. Interactions here are fleeting, accomplishing the necessary but no more.

More than reflect personal tension, however, this site also precipitates them. Villages are built around the same network of paths that criss-crosses the hills and links farms, plantations, rivers, and rest stops. These encompass their users in an intricate perambulatory field, influencing where and how they move, and who they meet along the way. But in a landscape where 'movement is the very essence of perception' (Ingold 1993:166), it is impossible to foresee who one might run into around a corner or over the crest of a hill. In my experience, most encounters along these trails are convivial—means through which a sense of co-presence in *abong ta* is generated. But in the awkward, liminal run-up to the village's full abandonment, they also spawned a feeling of entrapment by drawing together conflicting parties who would simply rather not run into each other. My jack-in-the-box experience, Emmi's hurried interactions with the women from town, and my conversation with Ganyo were relatively mundane examples of this problem. But Emmi's husband got into a more perilous situation during a tense period when their legal case was thought to be undermining their entire village's compensation prospects. Facing threats of violence from neighbours and relatives who were keen to resettle, he had to be accompanied whenever he went to his farms or the road. 'You never know who you may meet along the way,' he said, telling me that it was best not to be seen with him for a while.

In this way, the landscape around the dam has also been fostering new, antagonistic kinds of co-presence to which its increasingly unstable topography is central. And it is here that the clash between co-location and co-presence to which I alluded earlier occurs. For many of my acquaintances, being in the same place at the same time is not simply a neutral condition. Up to the present, co-location in and with this landscape, with its unpredictable and still fluctuating channels of movement, can engender tension, anxiety, and discord—in short, a soured form of co-presence when it isn't always wanted. This new reality is not only verbalized but deeply sensed and felt. In these moments, different presents and presences—temporal regimes, landscapes, people, political and legal frameworks—grate against each other, their frictions (Tsing 2005) turning the hills into a place where my acquaintances are not meant to *be*, let alone be co-present. And as I have discovered, ethnographers are not exempt from this problem. Enclosed in the same landscape as the affected villagers—my presence tied to my companions' or hosts', my behaviour shaped as much by emotion, confusion, and expediency as by professionalism—I too have become implicated in alliances, hostilities, and uncertainties on each successive visit.

Initially, I positioned myself as an impartial researcher, moving about recording village histories, land customs, and old stories. But over time, I have grown closer to some people (particularly Emmi's family), become interested in specific topics, and got drawn into unanticipated activities. Although none of the villagers view me as firmly planted on the anti-resettlement side, they now assume when we meet that I am on my way to 'the village that's fighting the government'. Even though I still get along with people such as Ganyo and the tree-fellers, our exchanges in the last couple of years have been increasingly marked by polite recalcitrance, suspicion, and vacillation. What we discuss, conceal, or play up is inevitably affected by our evolving perceptions of each other, who we happen to be with, and where we meet. These awkward encounters throw into clear relief a complication that pervades all anthropological research: the fact that ethnographic interactions constitute 'a mode of ethical engagement wherein we are arrested together with our interlocutors in a series of acts of perception and misperception' (Borneman 2009:238). Those ideals of ethnographic collaboration and dialogue so cherished by the anthropological heirs of postcolonialism and postmodernism are in reality more fraught and complex than they initially seem (ibid.).

In the last few years, my fieldwork interactions have been further complicated (or simplified) by waves of migration to urban areas and the start of resettlement, which have left the hills noticeably emptier. While emigrants remain co-present in this area in various ways—through periodic returns, kin relations, farms, and their actions from a distance—their general absence has helped alleviate tensions. But these demographic changes have also reshaped my fieldwork: given the impracticality of tracking down villagers in urban areas, I have focused for the last few years on the affected area itself—which has in turn meant interacting with a dwindling population of villagers who are mostly against resettlement. This has inevitably closed some doors and opened others. In recent years, for example, I have explored the ambivalence that the remaining villagers feel about 'development' (*pembangunan*), which they argue the government should bring to the hills, and examined the import of Christian morality in their engagements with the scheme. These insights cannot be attributed to 'the Bidayuh', the affected villagers at large, or the heightened comprehension of a reflexive ethnographer, but must be understood as deriving from a peculiar confluence of circumstances, relations, and consequences—in short, from the problems of co-presence and necessity running through this troubled space.

Conclusion

What is the anthropologist to make of this fractured, tension-riddled landscape? And how might she take seriously the fragile and unstable ethnographic material that it throws up? Given Borneo's status in the ethnographic imagination as a quintessential site of (non-Western) alterity—native cosmologies, headhunting, and indigenous rituals remain popular topics in regional scholarship—an ontological approach may seem an appropriate way forward.[6] One might, for example, adopt its 'purposeful naïveté' (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007:2) in treating certain Bidayuhs' exegeses on *abong ta*, genealogical networks, and local spirits as building blocks of a radically 'other' ontology. Asserting that '*to differ is itself a political act*' (Holbraad, Pedersen and Viveiros de Castro 2014), one might then, in a 'constitutively anti-authoritarian move', use these concepts to put 'established forms of thinking … under relentless pressure by alterity itself' (ibid.).

Such a strategy would arguably fulfil the recursive programme's desire for 'ethnographically driven anthropological self-trumping' (Holbraad 2012:46) by taking seriously certain

counterintuitive chunks of ethnography, marking the incommensurability between 'Bidayuh thought' (=ontology) and 'ours' (=Euro-American), and rejigging anthropological concepts and theories in light of all this. But the extent to which this project would tell us anything about my acquaintances' recent lived experiences, dilemmas, or priorities is debatable. This is partly because of its proclivity to gloss over local heterogeneities while privileging alterity as the seed of anthropological inspiration. From this vantage point, the affected villagers' conflicting involvement in pro- and anti-government politics, interpretations of Christian scripture, and debates about state-led development—all of which entangle them in worldwide networks of other Malaysians, indigenous rights claimants, and Christians—would, by dint of their apparent familiarity, be of less recursive interest than 'native' cosmology and sociality. Yet Bidayuhs' sense of being ideologically, materially, and socially co-present in such networks matter every bit as much as those cosmological, place-based and genealogical preoccupations.

As anthropologists have long acknowledged, however, ethnographic and authorial partiality is an inherent feature, not an insurmountable flaw, of the discipline. I am thus not insisting that good anthropology should consist only of thick ethnographic accounts, nor invoking a putative ideal of ethnographic holism to counter the ontological turn's topical biases. What I do wish to trouble, however, is the highly circumscribed understanding of 'taking seriously' that appears to justify such selectiveness. In the recursive programme, 'taking seriously' amounts to a unilateral decision by the ethnographer to take the 'manifest content of ontological [and other] assertions' (Keane 2013:188) at face value, and to use her ensuing cogitations to transform anthropology itself. Yet as I hope my ethnographic recollections reveal, this move does not only overstate the agency and aptitude of the ethnographer, it also seals her off from the messy social, political, and other circumstances in which ethnography is invariably enmeshed: from the random encounters, calculations, constraints, and other contingencies that determine not only *what* people say and do, but also who they say and do things to, and how and why these interactions transpire.

All these factors are as instrumental in shaping ethnographic knowledge as the reflexivity, good intentions, and intellectual aspirations that fuel ontological anthropology. They underscore the fact that anthropology is not, as many ontologists would have it, a levelling dialogue based on taking 'native exegesis' seriously; the anthropologist cannot flick an 'equalizing' switch of her own accord and expect everyone and everything else to cooperate. On the contrary, as I have tried to show, our insights are often less the products of what anthropologists want, but of what they are able to pull off (or not) in particular circumstances. As Navaro-Yashin reflects,

> The anthropologist's imagination is never simply a product of her or his professional training. Nor is the ability to relate in the field. Against a colonial conceptualization of research in which students of anthropology assume that the world is a laboratory from which they can pick and choose sites for fieldwork, I would argue that only certain spaces and themes make themselves available and accessible for study by certain people (2012:xii).

To be fair, exploring the politics and methodological constraints of ethnography does not feature highly on ontological agendas, recursively oriented as they are towards theoretical experimentation and disciplinary transformation. However, I would argue that it is *precisely this omission*—this elision of the problems of ethnographic co-presence—that undermines the ontological programme's central claim to take alterity and other phenomena more seriously than other approaches because it does a better job of 'thinking through' ethnography. This assertion serves as the basis of ontologists' insistence on the 'turn''s ethical necessity and superiority vis-à-vis other forms of anthropology. Yet on closer examination, the answers that

it offers to the enduring questions of what 'taking seriously' entails and how ethnography features in this project seem curiously impoverished. For while ontologically-inflected anthropology does present some intriguing intellectual possibilities, notably in its capacity to keep wonder alive (Scott 2013), it does so at a price: by ultimately sequestering anthropology from the complexities, multiplicities, affinities, and shared realities in which it is rooted and remains entrenched.

It is here, I suggest, that the notion of co-presence comes into its own: not only as an ethnographic descriptive, but as a bridging device that highlights the contiguity between the ethnographic encounter, anthropological description, and analysis, and the larger relational fields in which these emerge and continue to dwell. In this capacity, it can trouble the involutionary tendencies of the ontological turn, particularly by highlighting how anthropological knowledge is not merely generated through the progressive elucidation of 'native exegesis', but also through a discursive, material, and praxiological jumble shaped as much by chance and necessity as by intentionality, subjectivity, and intellectual preoccupations. And if anthropologists are to take their ethnography and the people with whom they work seriously, they cannot simply isolate the content of 'native exegesis' from such jumbles, but must grapple with how the latter inflect their descriptions, analyses, and theories.

This insistence on constantly (re)embedding ethnography in the troublesome relational web through which it is co-produced resonates with various arguments in anthropology since the 1980s: among them the 'writing culture' critique (Clifford and Marcus 1986), phenomenological explorations of 'intersubjective ambiguity' (Jackson 1998) or empathy (Maclean 2012) in fieldwork, and recent construals of co-presence as an imperfect but necessary form of communicative cooperation between ethnographer and informant (Beaulieu 2010; Fabian 2006; Pina-Cabral 2013). But whereas these writings dwell primarily on the ethnographic encounter and its textual representation, I would like to suggest in closing that the scope of their ongoing discussions can be broadened to encompass the 'befores' and 'afters' of those very encounters. After all, anthropologists start analysing, comparing, and theorizing both prior to and in 'fieldwork mode', while traces of the field always follow us back to our desks in the form of artefacts, fieldnotes, Facebook threads. Moreover, bumps and coincidences are not confined to the field: our work is equally shaped by our reading material, conference attendance, professional rivalries and collaborations, peer review, and the demands of our personal lives. Finally, anthropological writings can and do have very real effects in the world (see also Vigh and Sausdal 2014), whether by launching concepts into public circulation, corroborating essentialist ideas of otherness, or being deployed as political instruments by powerful and disempowered actors. All these factors, I argue, feed the dynamics of ethnographic co-presence, which does not simply start and end with 'fieldwork', but is an ongoing process of interaction, improvisation, and evolution that the anthropologist can only partially control and lay claim to.

What this expanded notion of co-presence points to, then, is the need for anthropologists to 'place academic projects of translation … on the same playing field as other projects of translation: as subject to our own [and others'] politics and practices and as worthy of interrogation as any other such project' (Brosius 2006:318). Such a move demands a different level of accountability and a broader reflexive undertaking than that advocated by the ontological turn: one that renders anthropologists permeable and vulnerable not only to carefully delimited moments of conceptual confusion/revelation, but also to the untidy relations, contingencies, and consequences of the conditions in which we work, both in and out of 'the field'. Indeed, I suggest that taking these aspects of co-presence seriously may push us

towards an even more radically transformative project than that envisaged by ontologists (see also Salmond 2014). Instead of simply using ethnographic revelations to rework existing concepts and theories, a commitment to permeability and vulnerability could introduce new parameters, realms of debate, and communities of interaction to anthropology: by making room for the (possibly conflicting) interpolations of 'native thinkers' and other interlocutors (ibid.), for example, stimulating new modes of intellectual exchange, or promoting different discursive and non-discursive formats that transcend the limitations of seminars, monographs, and journal articles.

Experiments of this ilk—in the form of 'dialogic' ethnographies (e.g. Crapanzano 1985; Tsing 1993), multidisciplinary collaborations, performative or filmic projects, and conference-based 'laboratories', for example—are not, of course, alien to anthropology. But at a moment when digital platforms are creating new arenas and politics of intervention, 'indigenous' and other voices are becoming increasingly assertive, and mainstream academic anthropology is being nudged, willingly or not, towards engagement with international conflicts, epidemics, identity politics and other 'real world' concerns, the need for openness to disciplinary transformation is arguably more pressing than ever. Such developments have ushered in new concerns, relational entanglements, methodological dilemmas, and modes of accountability, all of which are reshaping what it means for anthropologists to take things seriously, as well as the role and import of ethnography in these projects. And if anthropology is to address these challenges, it cannot simply fold inwards upon itself, but must, I argue, take seriously the social, epistemological, and political implications of its *own* co-presence in the very world(s) that it seeks to understand, elucidate, and even recast.

Notes

[1] Indeed, many ontologically-inflected monographs (e.g. Holbraad 2012; Pedersen 2011) contain wonderfully rich ethnographic accounts of such circumstances that overspill the bounds of their meta-theoretical prescriptions (see also Laidlaw 2012).

[2] The four affected villages comprise two sets of related dialect-based communities: one a parent and child and the other two siblings. However, their physical proximity and the constant traffic of individuals, land, and other things between them have cultivated a sense of being part of a shared spatial, temporal, and relational network.

[3] Most of the affected villagers are Anglican or followers of two non-denominational evangelical churches; one village contains a few elderly animists. Conversion mainly took place in the 1960s to 80s, but many old spirits and pre-Christian ritual conventions remain salient to life in the hills.

[4] The schools moved to the resettlement site in December 2013.

[5] Although the school, teachers, and students are now gone, residents of the new uphill village continue harvesting fruits and plants and picking up building material from the old site.

[6] I have myself drawn on aspects of the 'turn' in analysing Bidayuh ritual practices (Chua 2012).

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