

Chapter 10

Moving to Remain the Same

*An Anthropological Theory of Nomadism*¹

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In *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss famously described the native peoples of Australia as snobs:

Few civilizations seem to equal the Australians in their taste for erudition and speculation and what sometimes looks like intellectual dandyism, odd as this expression may appear when it is applied to people with so rudimentary a level of material life. But ... these shaggy and corpulent savages whose physical resemblance to adipose bureaucrats or veterans of the Empire makes their nudity yet more incongruous ... were ... real snobs. ... When one considers them in this light, it seems less surprising that as soon as they were taught accomplishments of leisure, they prided themselves on painting the dull and studied water-colours one might expect of an old maid. (1966, 89)

I open with Lévi-Strauss's provocative and outrageously anachronistic characterization of Aboriginals as armchair sophists and conformist hobby artists because I wish to set up a similarly provocative—but I hope productive and strictly contemporary—analogy between Mongolian nomadic cosmology and the petty-bourgeois ideals I witnessed growing up in the Danish province. I base this unlikely comparison on more than two years of fieldwork among especially Darhad Mongolian pastoralists but also Tuvinian reindeer breeders in the Shishged Depression, which is situated in the far northwest corner of Mongolia's Khövsgöl Province in a remote area that marks not just the geographical but also the cultural, religious, and ethnic border between Siberia and Inner Asia. At first glance, it is hard to imagine two contexts of social and cultural life any more different than Danish small town suburbia and Northern Mongolia's mountain steppe. Yet, what brings together the lives and the worlds of Danish suburbians and Mongolian nomads, I propose,

is a continual everyday emphasis on and persistent ritual celebration of the reproduction—or more precisely, the repetition—of things (selves, property relations, social networks, etc.) over time. To my Darhad informants as much as for the middle-of-the-road Danes among whom I mostly grew up, it often seemed that the best thing that one could imagine happen in the future “was more of the same” (understood in the dual sense of the term as both the “repetition of the same” and “more of it”).

Admittedly, this comparison may be too vague and too general to be of any purchase, for could such analogies not be traced between any two given ethnographic contexts? After all, is the desire for predictability not a universal human predicament? And isn't “the repetition of sameness” what all humans strive for in their existential quest for “ontological security” (Giddens 1991)? Possibly (though I very much doubt it). But this is not what I want to say by commencing this paper by describing Mongolian nomads and Danish suburbians as united in what appears like a shared celebration if not obsession with repetition. Rather, I wish to use this analogy as a vantage for posing ethnographic questions in a manner that will allow me to begin formulate an anthropological theory of nomadism which could, potentially, be of purchase anywhere and yet is irreducibly embedded in “conceptual affordances” (Holbraad 2014) forged during my fieldworks in Northern Mongolia.

Ultimately, then, my long-term ambition is to formulate a genuinely anthropological theory of nomadism that bypasses “the general” through ethnographically derived conceptual innovations that stitch together the concrete and the universal; a project that to some extent resembles what was already attempted (if not, as I am going to argue, fully realized) by Deleuze and Guattari in their famous treatise on “Nomadology” (1986; see also 2001). Indeed, leaving aside a number of increasingly dated studies of a predominantly materialist and social evolutionary bend (e.g., Khazanov 1994), there has been a glaring lack of attempts by anthropologists and scholars from cognate fields to offer a comprehensive, up-to-date synthesis of what nomadism is and what it might mean to be a nomad. In seeking here to take the first steps toward formulating such an anthropological theory of nomadism,²I not only hope to engage in ongoing debates concerning the relationship between anthropology and philosophy, but also to contribute to an emerging “post-relational anthropology” (Pedersen 2012b; Scott 2014) that seeks to experimentally examine the ethnographic and theoretical limits of the relational anthropological analytics spearheaded by Wagner, Strathern, and Viveiros de Castro. Still, the objective here is not to attack the “ontological turn,” to which I have myself sought to contribute and still remain theoretically and methodologically committed (Pedersen, 2012b, Holbraad & Pedersen 2016). Rather, what follows is a post-relational anthropological experiment that explores what comes after

the relation in the hope of pushing the ontological turn toward new horizons by extending its ethnographic and theoretical scope.

THE GREAT VOID

There are lines in the Mongolian landscape that never intersect or, at least, are not supposed to do so. On the one hand, there are lines followed by truck drivers and pastoralists alike in their journeys across the landscape. These are known as “roads” (*zam*) and people prefer to move along them without making any breaks beyond designated stoppage points (pastoral households, sacred stone cairns, etc.) to ensure that they reach their destinations in a safe manner (more on which below). On the other hand, there are also other lines in the land, namely the invisible “paths” (*güidel*) followed by different restless spirits, among whom the demons (*chötgör*) are feared the most. The trouble arises when the two types of lines cross, which they inevitably do every so often, given the innumerable number of tracks crisscrossing the Mongolian countryside in all directions. At these intersections (which aren’t really supposed to be there and should be avoided at all cost), dangerous and unpredictable events occur. Drivers leaving their cars for a leak return to find the tires punctured by invisible hands, and others have reportedly gone insane from images staring back at them as they bent down to wash their faces in the pools of water that appear from melting ice along rivers in spring.

I provide this brief vignette about visible and invisible lines in the Mongolian landscape in order to introduce a distinctive feature of what I have elsewhere called “the great nomadic void” (2007). In describing the Mongolian landscape as a void, I seek to convey the fact that, from the perspective of my Darhad informants, the steppe wilderness (*heer*) traversed by them during their annual pastoral migrations and other travels is largely empty. Or more precisely if also more paradoxically, as we shall see, it is simultaneously too full and too empty. Indeed, surprising as this may be to scholars of animist cosmologies in the Amazon and elsewhere (Viveiros de Castro 2001; Bird-David 1999), Darhads have no concept of an “original state of nondifferentiation” from whence everything originates, and which shamans, hunters, and others seek to actualize through the recitation of myths and the performance of rites (Viveiros de Castro 2007). Instead of being a seamless totality comprising everything, the nomadic cosmos is made up of multiple parallel worlds, which, to borrow a term from the cognitive sciences (Sperber 1996), are mutually encapsulated. Thus the shape of this cosmos may be likened to a Swiss cheese (Pedersen 2001). It comprises not a single relational totality, but several wholes detached from one another by just as many gaps,

fissures, and chasms. It is, so to speak, a whole with holes in it; or could one say: a hole (void) with wholes in it.

According to Tim Ingold, a “place owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there—to the sights, sounds and indeed smells that constitute its specific ambience. . . . It is from this relational context of peoples’ engagement with the world, in the business of dwelling, that each place draws its unique significance. Thus whereas with space, meanings are attached to the world, with the landscape they are gathered from it” (2000, 193). In many ways, this account resonates well with my ethnography. After all, as I have myself once argued (Pedersen 2003), because nomadism is such a spatially and bodily embedded practice, it makes limited sense to say that “the meaning” of this landscape is “attached to it” let alone “inscribed on it” in a so-called cultural construction of nature (cf. Ingold 1993; Casey 1996). Rather, following Ingold, meaning is “drawn” or “elicited” from the landscape via a continual engagement with it in the form of both everyday and more ritualized nomadic practices (Pedersen 2003; see also Humphrey 1995).

And yet, I now suggest, there is something about the way in which my Darhad interlocutors were present—or indeed were *not* present—in the land that is not fully captured by this “dwelling-perspective” (Ingold 2000, 2–3). I am here especially thinking of what often seemed to be peoples’ deliberate, if not systematic, effort to *not engage* too much with the world. Contrary to what might (as a shorthand) be called the Enlightenment ideal that humans always strive to enhance the visibility of things by making them more present to the senses, it would seem that certain Mongolian nomads deliberately seek to keep the world at a distance via a sustained effort at not seeing what could otherwise be seen. Far from seeking to become more intimate or even at one with the world by getting ever closer to it, people seem to be avoiding engaging too intimately with it; they are, so to speak, “undwelling the landscape.” Notwithstanding the omnipresence of the post-socialist state (which I, for the sake of brevity, shall largely omit from this chapter; but see Pedersen 2011), the nomadic relationship to land I witnessed in Northern Mongolia had an oddly detached feel to it.

Thus, during the many hours and sometimes days I spent on horseback in Northern Mongolia, I was often left with the impression that my fellow travel companions were hardly noticing the land, be that the texture of the immediate ground beneath us which our horses were traversing, or the wider vistas in the far horizon. Instead, people were preoccupied with other matters, such as, in the case of women (at the risk of falling victim to local gender stereotypes!), talking and chatting while trotting at a rather leisurely speed, or—in the case of men, and especially young unmarried ones—galloping at high speed across the steppe, sitting upright in the saddle singing loudly and pushing and pacing the horses with whips and words. Indeed, it almost seemed as

they were *supposed* to sing when galloping—to ensure, perhaps, by inserting a void between their mounts and the ground beneath, that they could somehow “surf” over the surface like surfers riding a perfect wave?

While these observations about the Mongolian nomadic landscape may seem speculative, the scholarly literature contains several indications that they are not necessarily as far-fetched as they may appear at first sight. According to the autobiography of the Buddhist reincarnation Kanjurwa Khutughtu, who was a prominent religious and political figure in Inner Mongolia during the first half of the 20th century, his monastery was thus “*koros-ugei*, ‘dead land’ (literally, ‘skinless’, meaning it had no ground cover). In the summer, the *lamas* ‘wanted to be ... on the green grass of the *korostei* or living land’” (Hyer & Jagchid 1983, 109). We are here reminded about Dee Mack William’s study of pastoralism and land reform in Inner Mongolia (2002). For if, he writes, “Han Chinese are culturally inclined to view a patchy desert-steppe environment as barren and desolate, a surprising number of local Mongol herders tend to view it not only as ‘alive’ but also as aesthetically pleasing” (2002, 185). In fact, Williams then goes on to observe that some of his Mongolian interlocutors “actually express poetic envy for the ‘freedom’ (*ziyou*) of the swirling sand. One of the village elders with a solid hold on privately fenced pastureland explicitly told me that Mongols had great ‘respect’ for the mobility of sand. While residents grumble about the increasing obstacles to their own free movement, the sand continues to move at will” (2002, 189–90). This recognition of—or in Williams’ apt phrase “respect for”—mobility as something that amounted to a phenomenon and an agency on its own also seemed to surface on the several occasions on which I was instructed to “watch the movement” by members of my host family when a migrating nomadic *ail* could be seen in the horizon. Again, one was here left with the distinct impression that “movement” was something worthy of respect if not excitement in and of its own right.

What these examples indicate, I suggest, is that the great nomadic void is qualitatively differently constituted than other (and to many people more well known) conceptualizations of emptiness as these can be found in, say, Newtonian physics and some Buddhist philosophy, where empty spaces are defined purely negatively by their lack. Certainly as Elizabeth Grosz points out, it is “a philosophical illusion that there is *less* in the idea of the empty rather than the full; and less in the concept of disorder than order, where in fact the ideas of nothing and disorder are *more* complicated than of existence and order” (1999, 221). For it should be clear that what I earlier described as the void-like state of the Mongolian nomadic landscape is invested with a peculiar positivity and thus efficacy in its own right—a *sui generis* spatiotemporal capacity (Corsín Jimenez 2003) which one must systematically learn and ideally come to cherish in order to live a nomad’s life. For the issue is not just

the pragmatic point that people often are preoccupied with more mundane matters of concern to indulge in “an ever more intense poetic involvement” (Ingold 2000, 56) with the land (although that is certainly often the case too). My point is also that people deliberately do not want to get too close to the land, as if not (fully) seeing and nor (fully) knowing was an end in itself. This “undwelling” of the landscape seems to reside in an unusual vantage, which makes things neither visible nor invisible, but *avisible*. Things must exist in a permanent state of negative potentially, which is equally opposed to the visible and invisible insofar as the latter two states both originate from by the same void-like ground, which is precisely that of “the avisible.” And in this avisible state, things are neither hidden nor apparent, nor virtual or actual, but something quite different: they are imbued with a latent intensity, which must be kept dormant at all cost.

But what is it like to live in this void? By what logic (if there is a logic) does the great nomadic void “work” both practically and more conceptually, and what might its distinct ontological features be? In order to address these and related questions, I shall now present a more general overview of the Mongolian nomadic landscape, particularly with respect to concepts of human as well as nonhuman ownership, and the different everyday as well as more ritual practices that regulate these complex proprietorial relationships between different forms of land, people, and animals.

THE NOMADIC LANDSCAPE

Expressed in plain language, it is simple: if you are a nomadic pastoralist you have to move several times per year, for if you don’t then your lifeways will come to an end. Or to put it even more bluntly: unless your herd is repeatedly moved to pastures with sufficient nutrition, your animals will die.

The annual migration patterns of the Darhad Mongolian nomads among whom I have conducted long-term fieldwork in Northern Mongolia resemble those of other pastoralists inhabiting the relatively lush mountain-steppe regions of Central/Northern Mongolia (Vainstein 1980, 93; Humphrey and Sneath 1999). Herders migrate between three and five times per year, spending the summer in the flat lowlands around the rivers and lakes, and winter in the hills and mountains sheltered from the cold northern winds (autumn and spring are spent at intermediate altitudes, often at the edge of the *taiga*). Also the livestock composition resembles other forest-steppe regions of Mongolia: there is an over-representation of horses and cattle (cows, yaks, and the hybrid *hainag*), and an under-representation of goats, sheep, and (especially) camels, in comparison to the steppe and semiarid steppe areas (Sheeny 1996, 45–52; Badamhatan 1986, 68). What distinguishes the Darhads, however, is the fact

that their migrations have been longer than pastoralist in other mountain-steppe regions. Before the collectivization some Darhad and Urianhai nomads thus made seasonal migrations of up to 250 kilometers (Badamhatan 1986, 27; Sandschejew 1930), and this pattern was continued into the socialist period and can also be found today (Badamhatan 1986; Pedersen 2011, 25).

Still, and contrary to prevailing stereotypes about nomads, Mongolia's nomads are not proto-cosmopolitans, who move wherever chance takes them in a carefree quest for freedom, change, and choice. On the contrary, I have often been struck by how structured, organized, and routinized life in the Mongolian countryside can—and in ideal terms should—be. To be sure, as we saw, people migrate with their animals and belongings numerous times per year, and it would be quite wrong to think in they set out on their journeys with a plan and that should be followed (in fact, traveling in rural Mongolia typically involves many ad hoc visits to family and friends along the way). Yet, these movement and even the various digressions on route can hardly be described as random. Like many nomads around the world, they follow the same migration routes, and use the same campsites (especially winter camps as these often comprise permanent shelters for animals and other material structures invested with usufruct rights), from year to year. Thus, when traveling in their “homeland” (*nutag*), Mongolian nomads tend to ride in a certain order along particular paths, while making an effort not to stop, except at those places where, as I was told, “people usually make a halt.”

Consider, for example, the migration routine of the Dukha reindeer breeders, whose homeland is located in the mountainous taiga towering toward the northwest of the almost pancake-flat Darhad *nutag*; but with whom Darhads share many social and cultural traits even though the two groups are considered to belong to different ethnic and linguistic “peoples” (*yastan*) (see also Badamhatan 1987; Wheeler 1999, 2000; Kristensen 2015). As I have described in more detail elsewhere (Pedersen 2003, 2009), Dukha migrations are highly ritualized. When the day approaches where they are going to move camp (which Dukha do very often, sometimes up to a dozen times per year), each household begins by packing their belongings in a specific order, and when they arrive at the new campsite, they end the journey by unpacking these things in exactly the reverse order. Furthermore, just prior to departure, the women carefully clean the inside ground of each tepee (*orts*) with brooms made from freshly cut wooden branches to ensure that, with the passing of time, the earth will show no sign of human habitation and intervention. Meanwhile, the men dismantle the *orts* and carefully place most of the wooden poles of which they are comprised in a neat pile on the ground, while leaving a naked skeleton comprised of the three main poles. When one travels through the Dukha *nutag* one occasionally notices these abandoned campsites which, were it not for their characteristic tripartite wooden structures

and the occasional forgotten vodka bottle or downtrodden children's leather boot, would be virtually indistinguishable from the surrounding environment. It is almost as if, in performing the same series of routines, but in reverse order, at the new and old camp respectively, the Dukhas take the "home-ish" qualities of their former campsite with them to the new one. However, given the existence of these tepee skeletons at their former campsites, it would be inaccurate to say that the Dukhas, when moving between camps, reduce their former places of dwelling into unqualified, neutral spaces. Rather, the abandoned campsites seem to remain distinct places in Edward Casey's sense (1995); only their home-ish quality, by virtue of these ritualized routines of unpacking, are so to speak eclipsed into a dormant potential. Indeed, much as is the case with Darhads (and especially so when it comes to their winter campsites as saw), Dukha nomads usually return to former campsites year after year, allowing for a reverse transformation of these places from latent homes into actual ones. Dukhas, then, are not just packing up their physical belongings to later unpack these at the new campsite. They also seem to wrap down their metaphysical "sense of place," to borrow a term from Feld and Basso (1996), only to begin unwrapping this home-ish affect the moment they reach their new campsite.

The cairn or *ovoo* is another significant feature of the nomadic landscape. Across the Mongolian cultural zone, *ovoos* have since time immemorial been built at those places—in particular, mountain passes, but also river mouths and other conspicuous sites in the land said to be the genius loci of "land masters" (*gazryn ezed*)—invisible spiritual entities responsible for the general conditions (such as rainfall, diseases, and fertility) upon which human and animal life depend (Bawden 1958; Heissig 1980; Sneath 2000; Hürlebaatar 2006). The typical *ovoo* consists of a cairn of stones, though in forested areas such as Northern Mongolia they are sometimes constructed from wooden branches. Ethnographic records suggest that *ovoos* traditionally were associated with the reproduction of different kinship groups ("clans") and administrative units ("banners"), whose members conducted annual sacrificial rites (*ovoony tahilga*) at *ovoo* sites with elder men—shamans beings ceremonial masters in their capacity of oratorical specialists and guardians of tradition (women were traditionally not allowed to participate in *ovoo* ceremonies) (Hamayon 1994; Humphrey 1996). With the spread of (Gelugpa) Buddhism in the 15th and 16th centuries, the ritual leadership of the *ovoos* was transferred to *lamas*, who took over the roles previously performed by local elders (*darga*) and male shamans (*zaarin*) (Tatar 1976; Heissig 1980).

During the state socialist period, the *ovoo* institution lost most of its politico-religious salience. The party justified the existence of the *ovoos* by their role as road markers; something, which, while not wrong given their positioning at hill tops and other prominent places in the landscape, ignored the

complex nexus of connections between land, humans, and nonhumans, which the *ovoos* had served to mediate. After the collapse of state socialism and the lifting of the ban of public religiosity in early 1990s, the *ovoo* tradition was reinvigorated. Typically, this reinvigoration took place with reference, not to virilocal or Buddhist collectivities as in pre-socialist times, but to lower levels of modern government, such as district (*sum*) and subdistrict (*bag*). These new *ovoo* celebrations are still predominantly a male affair (even if women are usually allowed to participate in the background), just as they are generally presided over by a mix of local political and community leaders as well as by Buddhist lamas from nearby monasteries (Pedersen 2011, 143–46; Humphrey & Sneath 2000).

Elsewhere I have distinguished between different rural Mongolian leaders with regard to what I call their “mode of centering” within their *nutag* or homeland (2006; see also 2011, 104–107). Thus the so-called “eldest men” (*hamgiin ah*) stand out by constituting motile “absolute centers” that correspond to the topography of the nomadic landscape and its fixed absolute centers, the *ovoos*. Local political leader, conversely are prominent constituting a sort of “relative center” on the scale of the modern nation state. Similarly, while hunters (and shamans) move along outward trajectories dispersing into the forest, old men tend to remain inside their *gers* waiting for people to visit them. Indeed, old men move around little. In fact, they are *supposed* to be less motile than other persons, since, according to “custom” (*yos*), their bodily composites and techniques of movement (when horse-riding, say old men do not tend to gallop and sing while on the move!) should reflect their advanced age (see Lacaze 2000; Pedersen 2011, 143–44). This not to say that old men don’t move: after all, many are them are pastoralists. But their movements take place within a landscape that is different from the “shamanic landscape” (Humphrey 1995, 1996) delineated by the forest and its multitude of wild animals and spirits, but also from what might be called the “administrative landscape” that is defined by the modern Mongolian nation state (see Sneath 2000; Pedersen 2006, 2011, 166–69).

From the perspective of the old men and the pastoral households of the designated “masters,” the nomadic landscape in that sense amounts to grids comprised by different centers of human and nonhuman ownership. This is substantiated by the fact that the terminology as well as everyday and ritual practices pertaining to the proprietorial authority over land are similar for humans and nonhuman masters. Thus the term *ezen* (pl. *ezed*) is used for any entity recognized as the “master” or “owner” of a given constellation of subjects (e.g., *geriin ezen*, “master of the yurt,” a status which also designates “ownership” of the household’s domestic animals; or *uulyn ezen*, “owner of the mountain,” a status involving proprietorship over all life forms). On the one hand, there are the different kinds of human masters or owners (the term

ezen designates both), ranging from household masters to imperial lords (Sneath 2000). On the other hand, there are also nonhuman owners or masters, including the land and water spirits (*lus savdag*) associated with *ovoos*, as well as the shamanic spirits (*ongod*), which in many cases originate from diseased shamans buried at particular scared places in the land (Diószegi 1961, 1963; Pürev 2014; Pedersen 2011: 168–89).

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In short, the nomadic landscape is like a planetary system with different centers in orbit. Some of these centers—such as the nomadic *gers* and households—are motile, while other centers—such as the *ovoos* and of course the mountains—remain forever fixed. And, crucially for the present argument, the rest of the landscape is for all intents and purposes empty, for it is comprised by all the residual chunks of space that occupy the gaps and interstices between these centers. It is upon these “residual chunks” that the livestock are put to grass, and across which the nomads themselves move when visiting one other, and when migrating (Pedersen 2006, 2007). And crucially, both these kind of centers—the motile nomadic households and the immobile *ovoos*—perform the role of what Caroline Humphrey has called a “co-ordinate singularity,” which she defines as a place “which appears singular when a co-ordinate system has been chosen in a specific way” (1995, 143). Indeed, Humphrey goes to suggest in an argument that I have myself sought to substantiate ethnographically and also further develop theoretically (2003, 2006, 2007, 2009): nomadic migrations are symbolic anti-movements involving the ritualized production of “homes away from home,” just as the packing and unpacking of the yurt follows standardized routines, as we saw. As such, Mongolian nomadism might be described as a “travelling that is not travelling,” for it “paradoxically negates movement in the everyday world” (1995, 142–3; see also Delaplace 2013).

In sum, these people are, in one sense, always moving and, in another sense, not moving at all, for the whole point about nomadism is for the world to repeat itself: Mongolian nomads move to remain the same! Contrary to stereotypes of nomads in the academy and beyond, then, nomadism is not about “becoming different” by tirelessly uprooting one’s home, belongings, and identity. On the contrary, as I shall now substantiate by engaging with some of Deleuze and Guattari’s as well as Kierkegaard’s ideas, nomadism is about “becoming the same” via systematic acts of repetition.

BECOMING THE SAME

In their famous “Essay on Nomadology,” Deleuze and Guattari suggested that “[Nomadic existence] designates the absolute character of a body whose irreducible parts (atoms) occupy or fill a smooth space in the manner of a vortex,

with the possibility of springing up at every point. [...] It is false to define the nomad by movement. [...] [T]he nomad is on the contrary *he who does not move*. [...] If the nomad can be called the Deterritorialized par excellence, it is precisely because there is no reterritorialisation afterward as with the migrant, or upon something else as with the sedentary. [...] With the nomad, on the contrary, it is deterritorialisation that constitutes the relation to the earth, to such a degree that the nomad reterritorialises on deterritorialisation itself [...]” (1999, 381–3). Leaving aside the ethnographic and historical objections that can be raised against Deleuze and Guattari’s selective and idiosyncratic reading of the scholarship on Mongolian nomadism and pre-revolutionary Inner Asian polities (Pedersen 2006, 2007; Sneath 2006), this oft-cited passage contains a groundbreaking anthropological insight, namely that nomadism is not about movement at all, as long as “movement” is understood to be a change between two ontologically distinct positions. This, however, is not to say that Mongolian nomads (or for that matter any other pastoralists in the world) are “nomadic” in Deleuze and Guattari’s normative (because philosophical and not anthropological) sense (Jensen & Rödje 2009). It certainly would be a mistake to conceive of my Darhad interlocutors (or any other Mongolian nomads I have met) as soldiers of a “nomadic war machine” that constitutes “the flipside ... of the State-form” (Deleuze and Guattari 1999, 384). On the contrary, Mongolian people tend to have a very intimate relationship to the state, especially in its idealized, mythologized form associated with the Mongolian empire instituted by Genghis Khan (as Darhad a man once told me, “the state is like an organ in my body”; see also Pedersen 2011; Humphrey 2004). More generally, as we saw, it would seem that Mongolian pastoralists like deterritorialized or “smooth space” (1999, 353) primarily because it allows them to “surf” between different places along well-trodden paths so that things can stay the way they were before.

Thus Mongolian nomadism might be conceived of as a “becoming” in Deleuze’s sense (1994); only it is a becoming that appears to be at least as conservative or reactionary as it is progressive and revolutionary, and which in that sense is at odds with Deleuze’s philosophical and political agenda. In order to convey this decidedly non-cosmopolitan gist of nomadism, it is useful to adopt Elisabeth Grosz’s distinction between the two Bergsonian/Deleuzian concepts of “duration” (*la durée*) and “becoming,” respectively. Thus, as she suggests, “[d]uration should not be conflated too readily with becoming, though it remains an abiding condition of becoming. Not all duration induces becoming; conversely, not all becoming necessarily involves duration. [...] *becoming* [implies] active transformation; while *duration* may designate a state of preservation or conservation as readily as a mode of transformation” (1999, 218; emphases original). So perhaps this is what nomadism is in Mongolia and possibly elsewhere: a distinct mode of duration in the Bergsonian

sense (1965; see also Hodges 2008), whose characteristic temporality cannot be adequately accounted for by means of prevailing binaries between being vs. becoming, or stability and motility. Certainly, it is clear that something is at stake in the manner in which nomadism is being practiced and thought about that involves a paradoxical combination—or even transcendence of the contrast between—“preservation and conservation” on the one hand, and “transformation and becoming” on the other. After all, is that not what all the work, skill, and effort that people in Northern Mongolia seem to be putting into being able to move on a regular basis while at the same time systematically negating or at least downplaying that any such movement is taking place seems to be about—a desire and perhaps also the ability to be both subject to “transformation” and “preservation” at one and the same time? Might this be what all this celebration and “surfing” of the nomadic void allows my Darhad interlocutors to do: to remain who and what they are, not in spite of and by resisting, but because of and by virtue of transformation? To substantiate this point, let us now briefly turn to Kierkegaard’s writings and recent attempts to “bring Kierkegaard into anthropology” (Tomlinson 2014; see also Rapport 2002; Pedersen 2011, 212–14; and Willerslev 2013).

While anthropology and Kierkegaard may seem like strange bedfellows, as Matt Tomlinson notes (2014, 172), his theology/philosophy offers one of the most sustained attempts to theorize the nature of “repetition” in human (specifically, but not exclusively Christian) lives; as also explicitly acknowledged by Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition* (1994, 5–11). This is not the place to go into details. But it may be noted that what makes Kierkegaard’s concept of repetition rather useful for our present purposes is the way in which it denotes a mode of human practice that is “not quite a break and not quite continuity, but rather an ongoing act of transformative reengagement and reaffirmation” (Tomlinson 2014, 166). Thus, for Kierkegaard, repetition is by no means a question of “preserving” the past or recollect and replicate it in a futile—because nostalgically backward-looking and thus essentially bourgeois—attempt to resist the inevitable passing of time (Kierkegaard 1983; see also Melbjerg 1990; Grøn 1993). On the contrary, repetition is an inherently future-directed activity—a “method,” if you like, for perpetually re-calibrating one’s self toward the future and thus also one’s attitude to and knowledge about the world, perhaps not unlike the way “hope” has recently sometimes been conceptualized (Miyazaki 2006, 2014; Pedersen 2012c). It is this future-oriented thrust, which, in Deleuze’s words, makes “repetition as such a novelty; that is, a freedom and a task of freedom” (1997, 6). More precisely, as Kierkegaard explains in *The Repetition* (1983), “what is repeated, has been, otherwise it could not be repeated, but the fact that it has been, makes repetition into something new” (cited in Melbjerg 1990, 74). This is also where another key concept of Kierkegaard, namely that of “the leap

(of faith)” becomes relevant to consider, for “leaping” is precisely how the Christian “knight of faith” is able to perform the seemingly impossible, or in Kierkegaard’s terms “paradoxical,” task of “recollecting forward” (and don’t forget that for Kierkegaard paradox was a good sign, Kierkegaard 1985). It is via inherently paradoxical but for the same reason existentially authentic acts of repeated leaping that “the knight of faith” is able to straddle or even overcome the seemingly contrasting temporal dynamics of preservation and transformation, conservation and development, and, indeed, stillness and movement.

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Much as with Kierkegaard’s notion of Christian faith, I argue, nomadic pastoralism in Mongolia involves a backward “movement in time: re-take, re-repeat, re-turn, re-verse means going back in time to what ‘has been.’ But ... in spite of this movement backward, ‘repetition’ makes it new and it is therefore a movement forward: it is ‘the new.’ The reason this movement backward is actually a movement forward is temporal: you cannot re-repeat/re-take what has been, since what has been has been” (Melbjerg 1990: 74). Still, at the same time, the two practices—faith and nomadism—hinge on altogether different concepts of personhood and moral ideal about human life more generally (coming to think of it, it would also have been strange if my Mongolian interlocutors had turned out to resemble Danish Lutheran existentialists; just as strange, as a matter of fact, as had these actually existing nomadic peoples really proven to correspond to “the nomad” and other conceptual persona invented by Deleuze and Guattari as part of their philosophical and political project). If, in order to be a knight of faith, one has to undergo constant leaps on the inside while appearing to be the same person on the outside to remain (repeatedly become) an authentic human being, then for Mongolian nomads it would seem to be the other way around: one must undergo continual movement on the outside to remain (repeatedly become) the same person on the inside. Let me now substantiate this claim by taking a look at another recent attempt to theorize Mongolian nomadism.

In an argument that has been developed in parallel with and independently from the interpretation of Mongolian nomadism developed by Humphrey and myself, Gregory Delaplace has explored the “disengagement practices” by which Mongolian nomads “seem to detach themselves from the places they occupy” (2013). As Delaplace writes, echoing some of the ethnographic observations made above, “[B]y leaving no trace at different stages of their nomadic path, refusing to do anything that might suggest that they exert control over a particular place, the Mongolian nomadic pastoralists seem to deny any attachment to places in which they live; or, more accurately, they deny any attachment to a particular place in the ‘homeland’ [*nutag*] in which they live [...] [by] seek[ing] to camouflage any attachment to particular place within it. By a set of tricks that punctuate or even organize daily activities,

Mongolian nomadic pastoralists [...] inhabit the whole of their ‘homeland’ without actually living anywhere within it” (2013, 106; my translation). What Delaplace is suggesting then is that by denying attachment to specific places and by instead claiming a belonging to the space as a whole, Mongolians nomads inhabit the totality of their homeland. They are always equally in their *nutag*, no matter where they are (G. Delaplace, pers. comm.).

This account, which is explicitly informed by Deleuze and Guattari’s above cited suggestion that nomads stand out from sedentaries by, so to speak, “holding the whole of space at once” (G. Delaplace, pers. comm.) provides a comprehensive and very interesting theorization of the logic of nomadic repetitions. Nevertheless, the theory of Mongolian nomadism I am advancing here significantly differs from Delaplace’s; so much, in fact, that it can in some ways be described as an inversion of his account. For whereas Delaplace seems to suggest that nomadism is all about the celebration of one whole space at the expense of particular places, then, according to the alternative interpretation sketched here, it is very much the other way around: at its heart nomadism revolves around a denial of big spaces to enable a (re)attachment to smaller places (for more details about this Mongolian “economy of places,” see Pedersen 2003, 2007, 2009). For while it is true that, also on my model, nomadism also involves the continuous detachment from specific places (camps) on route to other such places, this is no ordinary movement understood as a transformation (becoming) from one state of being to another. On the contrary, it is a movement, and a change, performed in the hope of *not* moving and not changing via continual and almost ritualized repetitions.

In short, nomadism is not so much about becoming different; it is also, and perhaps first of all about “becoming the same,” by doing all the work that one is constantly required to do in order to avoid having to change one’s basic lifeways and turning into someone else (after all, as Latour and other ANT scholars remind us, it required constant tinkering to ensure that precarious networks and fragile assemblages don’t fall apart; see, e.g., 2005). If Deleuze and Guattari’s speculative philosophical model required a nomad to have the capacity and willingness to continue moving in time in order to make oneself subject to perpetual transformation, then, according to my ethnographically derived anthropological account, it is all about repetitive movements between the same places to hold unwanted, if not downright dangerous, change in abeyance.

So that is what the nature of nomadism essentially is, I think: a sort of trampolining, where, instead of catching the wind to continually glide from one place to the next, one strives to catch or jump the movement (*nüüdel*) in order to “leap” from one place (home) to the next across a great void. But how did this void come into being—has the nomadic Mongolian landscape always been largely “empty” in this peculiarly intense way, or could it be the result of

AQ 58: Please check edits in the sentence “If Deleuze and Guattari’s speculative... change in abeyance.”

a more recent cosmological transformation? Clearly, this is not the place for a comprehensive answer to this question. But I do wish to consider a body of ethnographic material that I think may hold the key to answering not just this question, but also the wider question of what a comprehensive anthropological theory of nomadism might be. More precisely, in what follows, I explore in some detail what at first glance may seem to be an insignificant mythological peculiarity from the forgotten fringes of a shamanic cosmos. Yet, as I intend to show, it is precisely here—at the limits of shamanism itself—that we need to look to locate a possible origin of the coming into being of the great Mongolian nomadic void.

INSULAR OBJECTS

The following *domog* (tale)³ was told by an elderly nomad and his wife during the summer of 2000:

Once, Böövön shaman was drinking at a camp of seven households. His hosts made him drunk and stole a nice snuff bottle made of the most beautiful and expensive agate. “Give back me my snuff bottle, I brought it here,” he said [the next day]. “We did not take it, perhaps you lost it,” they said. To which old Böövön replied, “So be it, but in one week I shall return here in the shape of my light body (*höngön biye*)!” And then he left. Exactly one week after, all seven of them became gravely ill. A person was summoned, who told them: “You have done something very dangerous. You have taken Böövön shaman’s snuff bottle. You must bring it back to him. If not, you shall all die!” So, they wrapped the snuff bottle in a *hadag* [ceremonial silk scarf] and brought it back to him. At which point the shaman exclaimed, “from this point on, never steal peoples’ things!”

There was also a man called Shüülen, who lost a snuff bottle when he was hunting up in the taiga behind here. Upon his return from the hunt, he came to see my father to seek help from a diviner. “Please find my snuff bottle,” he asked my father. My father shamanized and said, “I have found your snuff bottle. It is there. But you cannot get it back. The snuff bottle is now a treasure thing [*erdeniin züül*]. It is too heavy, I cannot lift it. I tried to. Even shamans and spirits cannot lift such treasure things.

I wish here to focus on the role of snuff bottles in the tale, for they pose an interesting ethnographic challenge to established wisdom about shamanic cosmologies. How do we as anthropologists go about theorizing the existence of phenomena deemed so “heavy” that they are perceived to be outside the reach of shamans and their spirits? What are we to do with the fact that certain objects, like snuff bottles and other “treasure things,” are immune power of

AQ 59: “I have found your snuff bottle— Please provide closing quotes as appropriate.

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 Please check.

the otherwise omnipotent spirits? And more generally, given that shamanic spirits have so often been hailed as the relational, self-differentiating agents par excellence within North Asian (Willerslev 2007, Pedersen 2011) and other contexts (Viveiros de Castro 2007), what happens with concepts of spirits, things, and indeed “relation” when the ethnography seems to fly in the face of this logic of endless metamorphosis? To tackle these questions, I now consider the role of treasure things in Mongolian cultural traditions.

The ethnographic record is replete with accounts of “treasure things” that suddenly turn up in the wilderness, either for contingent reasons (like the lost snuff bottle in the *domog*), or, more typically, because they, in some cases literally, fall down from the sky, as with the meteorite stones and other extra-terrestrial objects worshipped in Mongolian folk traditions under the designation “heavenly stones” (*buumal*). As Walter Heissig explains, “Alongside the Ongghot and the tngri (heavenly powers), the shamans also worship a middle level of spirits which are called Buumal [...], ‘those who have descended’” (1996, 15). “Originally,” Heissig continues, “the name buumal referred to pre-historic objects found in the soil, particularly meteorites. In Buriat-Mongolia, these have been worshipped as the founding fathers of new shaman line. [...] For the Eastern Mongols, Buumal are the souls of deceased relatives as well as spirits with particular abilities and powers” (1996, 15).⁴ What this and other scattered ethnographic materials indicate is the existence of objects whose origin is perceived as extraordinary in the sense they originate either from “heaven” or from the deep past, and which shamans may incorporate into their pantheon of spirits. However, what is particularly interesting about these “treasure objects” is the fact that they are understood to be resistant to shamanic and other spirit intervention. *Buumal* may be used by shamans, yes, but they cannot be transformed by shamans. For example, in the Darhad Uri-anhai *domog* about the lost snuff bottle that I recounted above, the narrator’s father, the diviner, was able to locate the whereabouts of the lost object in his visions; but that was also as far as his shamanic capacities reached. The bottle could only be seen, not touched or be transformed by shamans or their spirits.

At first glance, we seem to have little other option than to conceive of lost snuff bottles, heavenly stones, and other “treasure things” as non-relational entities. Accordingly, to make a satisfactory account of this insular aspect of an otherwise relational cosmos, we need to look outside the ontological turn associated with Wagner, Strathern, and Viveiros de Castro. After all, if there is one thing that this analytical method does *not* allow for, by definition, it is to imagine an endpoint to processes of relational transformation (Holbraad & Pedersen 2009; Holbraad 2012), for relations are heuristically treated as if they are the building blocks of everything: self-differentiation is what there is (Holbraad & Pedersen 2016). Yet, as the *domog* illustrated, it is just this “methodological monism” (Pedersen 2012a) the present ethnography

contradicts, for the nomadic landscape includes things that stand out by *not being relational*, at least not anymore.

To theorize these “islands of nature” (Pedersen 2013) within a wider relational shamanic “sea,” I now wish to consider the so-called speculative realist perspective with philosophers such as Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, and Ian Hamilton-Grant. What unites these in several ways diverse and theoretically incompatible scholars is a shared dissatisfaction with the anti-metaphysical path pursued by philosophy since Kant’s Critiques, and a willingness to pose ontological questions anew, without reverting to the antinomies, impasses, and other dead ends of traditional dogmatic metaphysics. As Meillassoux puts it, “[C]ontemporary philosophers have lost the great outdoors ... existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not; that outside which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory—of being entirely elsewhere. ... It is therefore incumbent upon us to break with the ontological requisite of the moderns, according to which to be is to be a correlate. Our task, by way of contrast, consists in trying to understand how thought is able to access the uncorrelated. [...] But to say this is just to say that we must grasp how thought is able to access an absolute [...] whose separateness from thought is such that it presents itself to us as a non-relative to us, and hence as capable of existing whether we exist or not” (2008, 7, 29). Thus, summarizes Graham Harman, “relationality [is] a major philosophical problem. It no longer seems evident how one thing is able to interact with another, since each thing in the universe seems to withdraw into a private bubble, with no possible link between one and the next” (2010, 157). Theoretical differences notwithstanding, this is also Meillassoux’s concern: how to break free from the “correlationist circle” and escape the Kantian dictum “to be is to be a correlate” (2008, 53)? In attempting to address these questions, the speculative realists cast their nets in diverse theoretical directions, ranging from Meillassoux’s Badiou-inspired philosophy of nature as radical contingency to Harman’s creative merging of Heidegger’s tool-analysis and Latourian actor-networks (2009). Still, if there is a thing they all have in common, it is the fact that they all find it necessary to ask what comes after “the relation” (or more technically, the correlation) as a concept.

It is precisely this anti-relational framework which might help us to theorize the “insular anomalies” of Mongolian nomadic landscape identified above. For is it not precisely what the snuff bottle ethnography points to—the existence of non-correlational phenomena within an otherwise correlational cosmos? Arguably, the lost snuff bottle belongs to a non-relational dimension, which, to borrow Meillassoux’s term (*op. cit.*), might be described as the “great outdoors.” Contrary to received wisdom regarding the omnipotence and potential omnipresence of Mongolian shamanic spirits (Humphrey 1996;

Pedersen 2011; Swancut 2012), the *domog* suggests that there are entities in the nomadic cosmos that lie beyond the reach of the shamans and their spirits, and which are able to resist their otherwise potent capacity to intrude upon and change beings and things: a non-relational nomadic outdoors, which exists independently of human and nonhuman invention.

On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that it is neither ethnographically precisely enough nor sufficiently theoretically subtle to conceptualize snuff bottles and heavenly stones as non-relational objects. Rather, I suggest, it is more fruitful to conceive of these and similar objects as post-relational. For note how, in the above *domog*, these “treasure things” only became detached from the shamanic cosmos *after* they, for more or less contingent reasons, “fell out” of the shamanic cosmos of endless relational transformation. Don’t forget that before the snuff bottle was lost it partook in an overarching social and spiritual network much in the same way as other persons and things in the Mongolian shamanic cosmos do. It is in this sense that we should, indeed, think of the lost snuff bottle and other treasure things as insular objects: ontologically encapsulated entities that have irreversibly become detached from the seamless shamanic whole. Indeed, could this also be what other “treasure things” in Inner Asian traditions are: post-relational excretions, which, like an engagement ring dropped over board on a failed boat romance, have departed forever from the world of human and nonhuman relations to reside at the bottom of the world? On this account, the nomadic landscape emerges as a formerly relational totality that has irreversibly been transformed into a post-relational void comprised by insular islands of dead things.

CONCLUSION

We are now better equipped, ethnographically as well as theoretically, to answer the question of how the great nomadic void came into being. For what the aforementioned discussion left us with is the possibility that the great nomadic void might be theorized as formerly relational cosmos that has, over time, been subject to an inordinate number relational involutions of the sort described in the snuff bottle mythologies above. On this interpretation, then, the great nomadic void emerges as a post-relational whole, which has gradually been punctured or, so to speak, “hollowed-out” by numerous more or less contingent events, not unlike the manner in which, for Lévi-Strauss, complex social systems (such as the Indian castes) could speculatively be imagined as transformations or distortions of more archaic elementary (e.g., totemic) systems (1963; see also Pedersen 2001).

And once it is understood in such post-relational, as opposed to non-relational, terms, we better understand why the great void across which

AQ 61: “subject to an inordinate number relational involutions”—Please check if you meant “subject to an inordinate number of relational involutions” instead.

Mongolian nomads are “surfing” is not empty in a “dead” and “passive” sense. On the contrary, as I have sought to suggest, we may think of the nomadic landscape as very much “alive” and “agentive,” even if this agency takes a peculiar involuted and “invisible” form, invested as it is with an eclipsed potentiality never again to be actualized, since the condition of possibility for its realization—the seamless relational shamanic totality—is gone. As such, we may perhaps even think of the nomadic void as “more relational” (more intensive) than the relational cosmologies known from North Asian and Amazonian contexts, for it is the result of a relational totality which, via endless nomadic repetitions, has folded into itself.⁵

In closing, I venture a brief comment on how this paper has engaged with ongoing discussions about the relationship between anthropology and philosophy, including the prospects for a comparative metaphysics and the advantages (as well as limitations) for producing “ethnographic theory” (da Col & Graeber 2011). In many ways, the present chapter has thus spoken to and reproduced a familiar division of labor between the two disciplines, where philosophers are responsible for “the universal” and the anthropologists for “the particular,” including the introduction of ethnographic contingencies undermining the explanatory power provided by seemingly omnipotent explanatory frameworks. Only few anthropologists have discussed speculative realism in relation to ethnographic phenomena and derived ontological problems, and when they have done so it has been in negative and dismissive terms (see, e.g., Jensen 2013). Small wonder, for this unashamedly metaphysical position is in stark contrast to the decidedly reflexive and particularistic approach, which I consider to be the trademark of the ontological turn (see Pedersen 2012a; Holbraad & Pedersen 2016).⁶ Nevertheless, I have here sought to offer a more positive engagement with Meillassoux and his peers, if only up to a point. More precisely, my discussion of speculative realism had a doubly critical purpose. On the one hand, I used concepts from Meillassoux and Harman to describe aspects of my ethnography that could not be captured by conventional relational analytics associated with the ontological turn in anthropology, namely object said to exist “outside” the otherwise all-encompassing shamanic cosmos. But, on the other hand, far from accepting the speculative realist metaphysical position, I then used these ethnographic contingencies to extend (and thus criticize) not just conventional relational analysis but also the non-relational assumptions that underwrite Meillassoux, Harman, and their peers. And to be sure, this can only be a good thing! The fact that speculative realist vocabulary (or Deleuze and Guattari’s nomadology, or Kierkegaardian existentialism) could not fully account for the specificities of my ethnography was just as encouraging from an anthropological perspective as the aforementioned realization that the relational theory of shamanism, in spite of its proven successes in the

Inner Asian context, reached its analytical limits when confronted with the nomadic void.

This, after all, is exactly what all good ethnography is supposed to do to any theory (and, by implication, what anthropology should do philosophy as a whole): relentlessly challenge, distort, and extend all concepts and theories pretending to be general (Holbraad & Pedersen 2016). In Ingold's memorable phrasing "anthropology is philosophy with the people in" (1992, 696). Which arguably is another way of saying that, since anthropologists explore what I earlier called concrete absolutes (by bypassing the particular as well as the general) in a different and in a possibly more radical way than philosophers are willing, or able, to do, it could be suggested that the metaphysical scope of anthropology by definition is larger than that of philosophy, which emerges as our junior kin.

NOTES

1. An early version of this paper was presented at the Comparative Metaphysics Colloquium at Cerisy, Normandy, France, from July 26 to August 2, 2013. I thank the organizers for inviting me to this event. I also thank all participants in the colloquium, and in particular Anne Christine Taylor, Philippe Descola, Patrice Maniglier, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, as well as the three editors of this volume, for their comments. An abridged version was also presented to the panel "Different Repetitions" organized by Simon Coleman and Andreas Bandak at the AAA meetings in Washington, DC December 2014, as well as at the May 2013 conference "The Power of Objects" in Toulouse organized by Agnès Kedzierska-Manzon and colleagues, and I would also like to extend my thanks for the suggestions I received there.

2. Because the present paper is an attempt to synthesize other work I have done on Mongolian nomadism and shamanism over the last decade, it inevitably draws quite extensively on a number of more specialized published materials and arguments. These include, in particular, Pedersen (2007, 2009, 2011, 2013).

3. A longer presentation of the following ethnographic material, as well as a more elaborate discussion of it in relationship to discussions about the concept of nature and its anthropological purchase can be found in Pedersen (2013).

4. According to a website devoted to Mongolian shamanism, "Objects struck by lightning, meteorites, or ancient artifacts are called *Tengeriin us* (Heaven's hair). They contain a spirit (*utha*) which is a concentrated package of Heaven's power. Objects struck by lightning (*nerjer uthatai*) and meteorites (*buumal uthatai*) can be placed in milk or liquor to energize the liquid with the spirit of the object. Shamans drink this liquid to incorporate the power of the *utha* spirit (Heaven's power). Another form of *Tengeriin us* is the *bezoar* stone, which is used for rainmaking magic" (http://www.face-music.ch/bi_bid/historyoftengerism.html, accessed Jan 30, 2012).

5. Arguably, one of the characteristics of this post-relational void is a heightened capacity for outstretching relationships (Pedersen & Bunkenborg 2012). For is that

not what happens when a nomadic household repeatedly transposes its physical and metaphysical belongings from one place to another in accordance with the ritualized routines described above? As the primary “substance” of the Mongolian landscape—expansive emptiness being a predominant feature of the country’s rolling grasslands—the great nomadic void enables people to stitch together phenomena otherwise spread out over time, like, say, the handful of camps inhabited by a Darhad pastoralist *ail* in the course of its annual cycle of migrations. Thus understood, the “aviable vantage” of the great void allows people to see “many figures in one” (to paraphrase Annelise Riles 1998), for it enables them to imagine their home (*ger oron*) as being comprised by a series of disparate events in the landscape (summer camp, autumn camp, winter camp, spring, etc.). Precisely because its “scale” is expansiveness as such, the great void allows people to be “intimately distant” (Bunkenborg, Nielsen & Pedersen forthcoming) with people living away from them and with whom they have contact only a few times annually, whence changing their *nutag* from a dead expanse of homogeneous space into a living intensity of heterogeneous places.

6. To be sure, certain aspects of Meillassoux and Harman’s metaphysical proposals resonate with the ontological turn, notably the desire to ask the “forbidden” ontological questions that modern philosophy (and anthropology) has for long taught us not to pose. Still, as Casper Bruun Jensen puts it, while Meillassoux’s “argument is [an] apparent replication and intensification of anthropological ontologists’ attack on culturalism, [...] Meillassoux’s project runs directly counter to the ontological turn in anthropology” (2013, 327). In sum, whereas the speculative realists, in their role as metaphysicians, seek to formulate philosophically bulletproof concepts that denote true ontologies, what we care for as anthropologists is subject to a very different (since inherently contingent) matter of concern and control, namely that defined by the specificities of our ethnographic materials (Holbraad & Pedersen 2016; see also Graeber 2015, 23).

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Part IV

COSMOPOLITICS AND ALTERITY