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The affective labor of growing forests and the becoming of environmental subjects: Rethinking environmentality in Odisha, India

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ABSTRACT

How do humans come to care for their environment and what turns them into conservationists are central questions in environmental politics. Recent scholars have turned to Foucault's ideas of "governmentality" to understand how technologies of power intersect with technologies of the self to create "environmental subjects," that is, people who display a sense of commitment to the conservation of the environment. In this article, I argue that the applications of governmentality tend to privilege technologies of power and pay insufficient attention to the role of affect, emotions, and embodied practices in shaping human subjectivities. I draw on Spinoza's framework of affects and Hardt and Negri's idea of "affective labor" to bring attention to the processes through which human beings make themselves and the role of affect and environmental care practices in shaping subjectivity. Using the example of community-based forest conservation efforts in Odisha, India, I argue that we need to look beyond economic and political rationalities to explain human action and behavior. I suggest that villagers' efforts to regenerate degraded forests involve affective labor in which mind and body, reason and passion, intellect and feeling are all employed together. Through the daily practices of caring for the forest and helping the forests grow, villagers not only transform natural landscapes but also transform their individual and collective subjectivities. I conclude by elaborating on the "biopower from below" of these environmental care practices.

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1. Introduction

In view of current global environmental crises, the question of whether we can fundamentally change our ways of relating with nature is becoming increasingly urgent. These ecological crises and the arrival of the "Anthropocene" are challenging us to invent a "different mode of humanity" (Plumwood, 2002) and new ways of "caring for nature" (Milton, 2002) and of "belonging" (Gibson-Graham, 2011) in a "post-natural" world (Castree, 2004; Escobar, 1999). There is now a growing body of scholarship by human geographers and anthropologists – under the labels of posthumanism, vital materiality, and performance ontology – that provides tools to reimagine a new ontology of human beings and to rethink human subjectivity, modes of being, and drivers of human action (for a detailed review see Braun, 2004, 2008). However, academic theorizing and policymaking for environmental conservation have yet to fully embrace the radical potential of this work. At the same time, there is evidence coming from other disciplines, including evolutionary biology (Alexander, 1987; De Waal, 2008, 2010), neuroscience (Decety and Jackson, 2006; Maturana and Varela, 1987; Preston and De Waal, 2002) and behavioral economics (Bowles

and Gintis, 2011; Falk and Fishbacher, 2005; Levine, 1998), that shows that reciprocity, empathy, and affect play central roles in shaping human behavior and actions. However, environmental policy-making continues to treat human beings as rational economic actors and relies on economic incentives to transform human behavior. According to this view, subject positions and preferences are seen as fixed and pre-given and shaped by the perception of self-interest; meanwhile, the "self" that drives self-interest is largely left unquestioned. While the question of subject formation has long engaged the attention of philosophers, it has only recently begun to engage those in nature-society studies. Notably, Arun Agrawal's work (Agrawal, 2005a,b) has been influential in drawing attention to issues of subjectivity and subject formation within environmental politics. Drawing on Foucault's notion of governmentality, Agrawal (2005a, p. 166) uses the term "environmentality" to denote a "framework of understanding in which technologies of self and power are involved in the creation of new subjects concerned about the environment." Despite the richness in Foucault's later work on how human beings make themselves, Agrawal's analysis remains closely tied to rationalities of governance and the role of disciplinary practices in the production of subjectivity.

This paper brings Agrawal's notion of environmentality (and similar applications of governmentality) into conversation with

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ideas about subjectivity that are informed by a Spinozian perspective on affect and Hardt and Negri's concept of affective labor. Affects refer to the power to affect and be affected; and a focus on affects in our laboring (and everyday practices) draws attention to the potential of these practices to produce new ways of being, new subjectivities, and new forms of human communication and cooperation.

Using ethnographic research from community-based forest conservation initiatives in Odisha,¹ India, I illustrate the role of affect and environmental care practices in the production of new subjectivities. In Odisha, about 10,000 villages are actively protecting state-owned forests through elaborate community-based arrangements (Nayak and Berkes, 2008; Singh, 2002). They had been doing so prior to the state's provision of "incentives" to conserve forests or the invitation to "jointly" manage forests through the Joint Forest Management (JFM) program (Kant et al., 1991; Sarin et al., 2003). This paper shows that villagers' daily practices of caring for and regenerating degraded forests in Odisha can be seen as affective labor in which mind and body, reason and passion, intellect and feeling are employed together. Through the environmental care practices involved in "growing forests," villagers not only transform natural landscapes they also transform their individual and collective subjectivities.

This paper is based on my long-term engagement as an activist and researcher with these community-forestry initiatives. In 1990, my first job with a Swedish consulting firm managing the Social Forestry Project took me to Odisha, where I found that villagers were actually protecting the state-owned forests that the Project sought to "protect" from them. After my initial, naïve efforts to make visible local forest-conservation efforts, I spent about a decade with Vasundhara, a Bhubaneswar-based NGO, supporting the community-forestry initiatives in their struggle to gain rights over forests, before coming to academia. This paper uses data from ethnographic research conducted from 2004 to 2007 in the form of village case-studies, oral histories, village songs, and poems and also draws upon insights from my practitioner work. During this long-term engagement with communities in Odisha, the question that I had initially set aside with easy answers has come back to engage my attention – that is, Why have villagers invested their labor (and love) in protecting forests over which they have few formal rights? Economic reasons and subsistence dependence on forests provide a partial answer, but they do not explain how subjectivity is produced through processes of "becoming" at work and through the dynamic relations between people and forests. Reading Agrawal's *Environmentality* against my experience of shifts in environmental subjectivities in Odisha left me frustrated – as the analytics of environmentality did not seem to provide enough space for local agency (dispersed over forests and people) and for the processes of "becoming." I turned to Spinozian philosophy and to the biopolitical potential of affective labor to open up ways of theorizing local agency and emergence that are creative and life affirming.

I state my positionality in order to emphasize that I did not read local conservation practices through the lens of the "in-vogue" theories of posthumanism, liveliness of matter, and affect; rather, I turned to these theories in my restless quest to better understand and explain how people's sense of self and subjectivity are intertwined with their biophysical environment and with the forms of human cooperation that emerge in response to changes in this environment. Spinoza's philosophy, as taken up in the works of Deleuze, Massumi, and Hardt and Negri, provided the tools to better understand the "becoming" of people who care for their environment. In stark contrast to the application of Foucauldian "governmentality" to the making of environmental subjects in

Agrawal's framework of "environmentality," Spinozian optics of affect help us understand how people's sense of self is shaped by their affective capacity to respond to other bodies, both human and non-human.

The article begins with a discussion about the analytical framework of environmentality and its limitations, then explores Spinoza's perspective on affects and Hardt and Negri's employment of Spinozian affect theory, in their notion of affective labor and biopolitics from below. Next, it describes villagers' efforts in Odisha to protect local forests; illustrates the everyday practices and affective dimensions involved in the laboring practices of caring for forests; and discusses how their affective labor transforms local subjectivities. It concludes with a discussion of the biopolitical potential of such environmental care practices to produce new subjectivities and to challenge state and capitalist projects to discipline and commodify life.

2. Beyond environmentality: Affects, affective labor and intimate environmental practices

Through his study of forest councils in Kumaon, India, Agrawal (2005a,b) traces the transformation in rural residents' attitudes toward forests, from apathy in the 1920s to active support for conservation in the 1990s, and he attributes this change to their involvement in the government (in a Foucauldian sense of guiding the conduct of others' conduct) of the environment. Agrawal's work opens up new ways of understanding environmental subjectivity "beyond the limited perspective of structure and agency" (Raffles, 2005) and illustrates that, contrary to the expectation that actions follow beliefs, actions – such as participating in the governing of the environment – often lead to new beliefs and, thus, new subjectivities. Agrawal uses the term "environmentality" to draw attention to technologies of self and power at work in the creation of new subjects.

Agrawal's work has been critiqued for insufficient attention to local agency (Acciaioli, 2006; Gupta, 2005), an ahistorical view of different identity categories and positions (Hathaway, 2005; Nar-kotzy, 2005), and for insufficient engagement with the "complex and deeply biographical practices" through which environmental subjects make themselves and are made (Raffles, 2005). His work also tends to privilege technologies of power and pay insufficient attention to techniques of the self (Cepek, 2011; Singh, 2009). This is a common shortcoming in many of the applications of Foucault's ideas of governmentality, which I believe arises due to the uneasy mixing of Foucault's ideas of "neoliberal governmentality" (the material that was not fully developed by Foucault and remained inaccessible till recently) with the notions of power and subjection found in his earlier work. This work, by Foucault's own admission, had insisted too much on the "technology of domination and power" (Foucault et al., 1988), while his later work was more engaged in the "technologies of self" (Foucault et al., 1988, p. 19). Foucault's ideas on subjectivity evolved from the view of "docile bodies" under a disciplinary gaze (Lemke, 2001, p. 203) to that of bodies resisting techniques of domination and engaged in liberation through techniques of the self. In "neoliberal governmentality" Foucault is more concerned with "the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And conversely, . . . where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion and domination." (Foucault, 1993, cited in Lemke, 2001, p. 204). This nuanced analysis is usually missing from other scholars' applications of governmentality, and Agrawal's work is no exception.

In the following sections, I discuss the Spinozian perspective on affects; Hardt and Negri's concept of affective labor and its

¹ Formerly known as Orissa, Odisha became the official name 2011.

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