



A swamp and its subjects: conservation politics, surveillance and resistance in Trinidad, the West Indies

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Abstract

Once overlooked or scorned for its purportedly “unscientific” and culturally contextual nature, local knowledge has recently become a key ingredient in conservation and development planning in developing countries. However, this abrupt shift in the conceptualization and assumed utility of local knowledge has not received widespread theoretical attention. In addition, the literature on local knowledge is dominated by discussions of the scientific and applied merits of local epistemologies, and little theorization has been devoted to the explicitly spatial and social contexts that inform the encounters between local and scientific knowledge. This article draws on Michel Foucault’s notions of subjectification, surveillance, and subjugated knowledge to analyze the liberatory potential of local knowledge through its embodiment in spatially situated subjects. The article builds on a case study in Trinidad, focusing on the subjectification of local fishermen through constructions of local knowledge, and the ways in which this subjectification was reversed and employed in the performance of resistance and intracommunal conflicts.

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1. Introduction

“Local knowledge” has become emblematic of the participatory turn in Third World development and conservation practice. Once scorned as an obstacle to development and relegated to the realm of superstition or magic, practitioners and theorists have during the past decade embraced local and indigenous thinking, experimentation, and epistemologies as the key to remedying the poor and disempowering performance record of decades of top-down conservation planning. This paradigmatic turn—from local knowledge as myth to local knowledge as resource—is commonly viewed as a natural, discontinuous development in the progressive march of Western science: since local knowledge has been “proved” useful by scientific standards, Western rationality demands it is incorporated into the narratives

and practices of conservation planning in Third World countries.¹ However, less attention has been given to problematizing the innately *geographical* contingencies and consequences of this incorporation of local knowledge into the conservation and development discourse. I speak here in terms of projects of place-making for biodiversity conservation, i.e., the social production of places as bounded landscapes deemed worthy of protection as national parks and the like. By situating my analysis at the intersection of these two hegemonic projects of post-colonial desire—place-making and the quest for local knowledge—I seek to explore the spatial discontinuities and fractures which inform what knowledge becomes privileged and by whom, and the spatial networks through which knowledges become embodied and employed both in the practice of power and in the performance of resistance.

¹ I borrow the notion of local knowledge as myth from Scott (1996), who analyzes environmentalists’ and public officials’ use of Cree environmental knowledge to advocate certain development positions.

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In order to consider the multiple ways in which these new representations of local knowledge provide possibilities for power and resistance, and how these possibilities emerge from specific places at specific times, I will disturb the binary between “experiential,” situated local knowledge, and universal, rational scientific knowledge (e.g., Bebbington, 1993; Nader, 1996, pp. 2–3). The result of this dichotomization of local knowledge is an unfortunate contradiction: as the desire for local knowledge increases among Western scientists, local knowledge is increasingly dislocated from their cultural context, recodified, and encapsulated within the boundaries of Western science (Bebbington, 1993; Escobar, 1995, p. 204; Eyzaguirre, 2001). The participatory conservation literature is dominated by reflections of the best methods to “incorporate” local knowledge into the development project, but instead of “learning” from indigenous people, Western scientists appropriate local knowledge and convert it into discreet bits of “information.” In the process, they devalue the bearers of the local knowledge systems and undermine organic processes of knowledge production occurring within different social contexts (Samoff and Stromquist, 2001). On the other hand, while strategic essentializations of local knowledge fuel indigenous projects of self-reliance and territoriality, they simultaneously feed a disempowering and delimiting discourse of indigeneity. This contradiction is perhaps most prevalent in indigenous and local representations of self as ecologically sensitive, symbiotically linked with the land, and the like, which result in a situation where local and indigenous peoples are complicit in their own subjugation (Milton, 1996, p. 202; for more on the critique of strategic essentializations and discourses of indigeneity see also Appadurai (1992, 1995), Escobar (1998), Gupta (1998) and Gupta and Ferguson (1992, 1997); for a traditionalist critique of indigenous conservation management based on local knowledge, see e.g., Redford and Stearman (1993)).

I suggest that this dichotomization of local and scientific knowledge is in part due to the lack of consideration of social processes involved with this latest rediscovery of local knowledge in the North, and the curious inattention to the spatial nature of this particularly spatial phenomenon. In this article, I engage with the work of Foucault (1972, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1983, 1984) and the literature in feminist geography to consider the practice of knowledge, which traverses space and places in inherently uneven, contested, and discontinuous ways, and informs and moderates relations of power in equally unpredictable ways. In his work, Foucault was sensitive to the manner in which spatial relations are deeply implicated in historical processes (Philo, 2000, p. 221), and I draw on this spatio/historical perspective to illuminate the production and practice of local knowledge within spatially contingent fields of

power relations. This Foucaultian perspective provides a point of departure to consider the multiple fissures through which “local” and “scientific” knowledges flow, intersect, and mingle, and the manner in which knowledges are embodied and put to use through a myriad of techniques intended to produce and contest the workings of power in particular places at particular times. Through such a nuanced reading of the limits and yet also “positive” dimensions of power associated with situated knowledges, I consider knowledge as *practice* implicated in contested processes of subjectification and surveillance.² Local knowledge is thus never divorced from relations of power, but acts through its spatiality to affect power in multiple ways—not simply as a unified form of communal “resistance” against a monolithic state, but rather as a complicated web of contestation and subjugation “taking place” at myriad points and between myriad actors across a power-laden landscape. Just as the “modern” is transformed and produced in its encounters with the non-modern (Watts, 1995, p. 61), globalized, scientific knowledge is modified when it intersects with local knowledge at specific places at specific times.

To unpack the sometimes counterintuitive responses of local communities to processes of surveillance and subjectification operating through scientific knowledge, I am also aided by the work of feminist theorists, who have developed effective critiques of the hegemony of anthropocentric science, and in the process have further elaborated Foucault’s perspectives on surveillance and subjectification (e.g., Robinson, 2000; Sawicki, 1989, 1994; Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1986). To further expand the understanding of the spatial nature of the operations and contradictions of knowledge practices, I draw on Sharp et al.’s (2000) notion of “entanglement” to underscore that processes of power/knowledge also operate across and through space, producing new forms of embodied surveillances and subjectification among different, “local” actors. By illuminating the explicit spatial dimensions of subjectification and surveillance associated with knowledge constructions and knowledge practices, I view local knowledge as a positive and active form of power, operating through spatially contingent fractures in supposedly hegemonic development and conservation projects.

I build my case on an analysis of narratives of place, knowledge, and identity in the rice farming and fresh-

² The concepts of “positive” power, subjectification, and surveillance will be developed further in the following pages. I refer here to the role of power in constituting subjects in terms of discourses, and of the means by which subjects are controlled through surveillance operating in spatial fields (for further explication of positive power, see e.g., Gordon (1980, p.234) and Sharp et al. (2000, p. 15); for more on subjectification and surveillance, see e.g., McHoul and Grace (1993, p. 65), Merquior (1985, p. 113) and Racevskis (1983, p. 9)).

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