



Neoliberal performatives and the ‘making’ of Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES)

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Abstract

This paper argues that Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) serve as a neoliberal performative act, in which idealized conditions are re-constituted by well-resourced and networked epistemic communities with the objective of bringing a distinctly instrumental and utilitarian relationality between humans and nature into existence. We illustrate the performative agency of hegemonic epistemic communities advocating (P)ES imaginaries to differentiate between the cultural construction of an ideal reality, which can and always will fail, and an external reality of actually produced effects. In doing so, we explore human agency to disobey performative acts to craft embodied and life-affirming relationships with nature.

Keywords

ecosystem services, environmental policy, neoliberalism, payments for ecosystem services, political ecology

1 Introduction

Over the past decade, ‘Payments for Ecosystem Services’ (PES) has increasingly dominated the international agenda of environmental conservation, signalling a shift in the discourse towards efficiency-led conservation-related expenditures

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(Muradian et al., 2013; Sandbrook et al., 2013). PES rests on the presumption that land-users are ill-motivated to adopt environmentally beneficial land-use practices unless they could be adequately incentivized to do so (Engel et al., 2008). The seductive popularity of incentive-based approaches to environmental governance has emerged in opposition to rigid, antagonistic and hierarchical environmental policy in favour of creative tailor-made solutions centred on flexibility, faith in the self-interest of the rational actor, and magnifying the entrepreneurial spirit of land-users' optimizing behaviour (Redford and Adams, 2009; McCarthy, 2005). Indeed, as the following statement from the World Bank attests, the focus on individual decision-making through economic incentives has emphasized the added-value of PES within a market framing: 'market-driven PES programs are the most likely to be sustainable because they depend on self-interest of the affected parties rather than taxes, tariffs, philanthropy, or the whims of donors' (World Bank, 2006: 4, cited in Shapiro-Garza, 2013). While some scholars advocate PES for its efficiency gains backed by conditional payments according to rational self-interest (e.g. Wunder, 2015; Alix-Garcia et al., 2008; Ferraro and Kiss, 2002), others have called for sensitivity to institutional contexts and distributive justice (e.g. Costedoat et al., 2016; McDermott et al., 2013; Farley and Constanza, 2010; Muradian et al., 2010; Corbera et al., 2007), including through the framing and choice of words used to articulate PES (e.g. Clot et al., 2017; Van Noordwijk and Leimona, 2010). Still others have denounced PES outright as the latest cumulative tendency of capitalist relations by 'selling nature to save it' (e.g. Fletcher and Büscher, 2017; Matulis, 2015; Büscher, 2014; Sullivan, 2013; McAfee, 2012). Finally, there are those who use PES as a medium for uncovering the social diversity, multi-dimensional individuality, and power relations in enhancing the agency of actors to rework otherwise

hegemonic human-nature relations (e.g. Van Hecken et al., 2015b; McElwee et al., 2014), including the potential for alternatives to PES (e.g. Muniz and Cruz, 2015; Singh, 2015).

In response to intense debate over the conceptualization and the diversity of PES applications in practice, there have been renewed calls to more clearly define PES while continuing to defend the tool as *functional* to avoid sully the conceptual innovation of PES with normative inclusions (e.g. Wunder, 2015). In attempting to encompass a diverse range of PES applications in a supposedly non-normative framing, Wunder (2015) redefines PES as 'voluntary transactions between service users and service providers that are conditional on agreed rules of natural resource management for generating offsite services' (p. 241). This revised definition attempts to 'de-marketize' the language surrounding PES by no longer considering negotiating parties as 'buyers' and 'sellers', while shifting conditional payments to agreed-upon rules between 'service providers' and 'service users' for 'generating offsite services'. What remains conspicuously missing, however, is a reflection on the narrowed logics by which human-nature relations are circulated, the power of well-networked experts in naturalizing institutional frames of reference within such narrow logics, and the broader and often invisible workings of control in rendering human-nature relations as mechanical equivalencies to be socially engineered (Hausknot et al., 2017; Pasgaard et al., 2017; Spash, 2015; Farrell, 2014; Li, 2005).

Many authors have argued that the significance of taxonomy has less to do with the innovative nature of definitional features and much more to do with a set of social rationalities, characterized by both discursive and non-discursive practices, which reproduce simplified constructions of human and nature relationships for political purposes (Tadaki et al., 2015; Brand and Vadrot, 2013; Raymond et al., 2013; Büscher et al., 2012; McElwee, 2012;

Redford and Adams, 2009; Igoe and Brockington, 2007). Specifically, PES (i) essentializes the construct of ecosystem services (henceforth ES) (e.g. Boyd and Banzhaf, 2007; Robertson, 2000) and (ii) attaches an exchange value for their ‘demand and supply’ (e.g. InVEST map and valuation tool) as seemingly pre-given entities that stem from and hence create an uncontroversial ‘science’ (Nature Editorial, 2017; Naeem et al., 2015). While scholars have argued rather convincingly that PES rarely if ever operates according to sheer market-based arrangements (Muradian and Gómez-Baggethun, 2013; Sandbrook et al., 2013; Van Hecken et al., 2015b; Wunder, 2015; Pirard and Lapeyre, 2014), this fact alone is insufficient to dismiss a broader discursive shift from ecological values to more market-driven values geared towards furthering economic production. In the latter sense, nature becomes a set of measurable and required inputs for the continued functioning of economically rational human beings (Fletcher and Büscher, 2017; Matulis, 2015; McAfee, 2012). In this paper, we define a rational account of nature, in particular neoliberal rationality, as an ‘amalgamation of ideology and techniques informed by the premise that natures can only be “saved” through their submission to capital and its subsequent revaluation in capitalist terms’ (Bücher et al., 2012: 4; see also McAfee, 2012). Specifically, we emphasize the Foucauldian aspect of neoliberalism as a form of ‘governmentality’ which socially reproduces symbolic meanings, imaginaries, ways of being or doing, or the very framing of reality to identify governable subjects (e.g. humans and nature) (Brand and Vadrot, 2013; Fletcher, 2010; Robbins, 2001).

This paper borrows from Judith Butler’s (2010) performativity and, by doing so, extends beyond a Marxist critique of (P)ES as commodity fetishism by distinguishing the dialectics of human-nature relations from the *representation* of these relations as inputs for economic production. Hence, the ‘market’ becomes the

ultimate performative space through which human-nature relations are (re)constructed, irrespective of failures in the performative act to ideally materialize markets in practice (Whatmore, 2006; Agarwal, 2005). By failing to recognize this performance, plural human-nature relations are held captive within pre-existing and unquestioned ontological framings of (P)ES, which precludes the agency of people to articulate socio-nature experience in any other way.

By examining how ES (and subsequently PES) is performatively constituted, this paper advances PES scholarship in several ways. First, performativity makes visible the cognitive frames of how human-nature relationships can or should be constructed. For instance, an understanding of performativity illustrates how emphasizing the ‘functionality’ of PES both justifies and reinforces the discursively hegemonic and well-resourced ‘PES train’ which Wunder (2015: 241) described as harnessing the PES narrative to create NGO-development donor confidence. It does so by reproducing and reinvigorating faith in particular human-nature framings, while delimiting and even disciplining alternative imaginaries for articulating human-nature relations (e.g. ‘whom we should invite to our next PES workshop and whom not’; 2015: 241). Second, performativity applies itself to the notion of neoliberalization as a process, rather than an outcome, since any governmentality must be continuously reproduced or re-enacted in both conscious and unconscious ways in order to sustain itself. For instance, those who *consciously* claim that private property rights reflect the idealized arrangement for an efficient exchange of ES also *unconsciously* internalize the instrumental value of nature for humans through the very utterance of ES in the process of making such an assessment. Similarly, those who challenge (P)ES as stuck within a ‘selling nature to save it’ trope invariably reproduce neoliberal governmentality by making more ‘real’ the very logics they are seeking

to dismiss. In both cases, unconsciously internalizing human-nature relations as ES, even in opposition to ES, merely results in the performative patterning of neoliberal governmentalities in ever more creative ways. Third and perhaps most importantly, performativity permits going beyond economic determinism in either characterizing ‘functional’ theories (e.g. Wunder, 2015) or overly determining neoliberal structures (e.g. Fletcher and Büscher, 2017), by instead focusing attention on when neoliberal governmentalities succeed or fail to perform as theorized. From this perspective, we might explore how and why a neoliberal performative brings about certain expected or ideal effects, or alternatively, fails to produce these ideals and how this might reveal the ‘maneuverability’ space to enhance individual and collective agency to deconstruct dominant conventions in the making of human-nature relations (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Adopting a performativity lens thus offers a cognitive ‘escape’ to avoid creating new performative binaries (e.g. neoliberal vs. non-neoliberal) by overdetermining seemingly stable structural hegemonies such as ‘neoliberalism writ large’ (e.g. Fletcher and Büscher, 2017). Rather than patterning performative natures in new (even opposing) directions, we argue for the possibility to explore the agency of actors who perhaps unconsciously escape the neoliberal performative in alternative and more life-affirming ways.

In the following section, we explore the literature on performative agency, particularly in revealing how the ES narrative actively constructs, within dominant social norms and conventions, particular socio-nature realities that may or may not result in intended effects. In Section III, we identify how human-nature relations have become normalized in ways that provide a distinct ontological lens for the (P)ES framework to emerge. Section IV illustrates how (P)ES is reproduced within well-resourced and networked epistemic communities that visibly and invisibly perform distinctly

neoliberal human-nature relations. In Section V, we discuss the implications of understanding (P)ES as neoliberal performatives, which can facilitate awareness of when and how these metaphors become either socially empowered or fail to perform. In conclusion, we emphasize that the performativity lens acknowledges the limitations of continuing to make and pattern ‘worldviews’ while itself serving as a crucial rupture for articulating social and ecological subjectivities beyond them.

II PES as a neoliberal performative

The idea of performativity is rooted within literary studies, philosophy and social sciences and attempts to dislodge seemingly stable phenomena, objective categories or social conventions. It explores the extent to which the utterance of certain ideas or constructs sets into motion particular actions or effects that may be socially and physically manifested. Performativity was initially developed by J.L. Austin’s (1962) Speech Act Theory in which he proposes that statements, explanations, perceptions or definitions do not merely describe or report, but actually *make things happen* or perform effects that physically substantiate their claim as ‘true’ or real. The most common example employed by Austin is the utterance of ‘I do’ at a wedding, which not only describes the promise of union, but also performatively substantiates the marriage by bringing a certain kind of reality into being in accordance with established social conventions. For a performative to work, it must not only be fortified by existing social conventions and norms, but faith must exist that its utterance will result in actionable consequences. As Bastian (2012: 33) highlights, the statement ‘it is now 3:30p.m.’ not only accords with social conventions about the nature of time, but also actualizes coordination between people who express faith that 3:30p.m. is a true or real indication of time. Similarly, the metaphor of ES is not a ‘real’ truth that precedes its socialized

representation; it is discursively brought into existence through a combination of underlying values, goals, uses, and forms of communication (Battistoni, 2016; Mitchell, 1998).

What happens, then, if the definition we adopt to describe PES serves to affirm the notion of ES as the most appropriate metaphor or framework to explain human-nature relations? In this case, the regenerative, interdependent, and lively (and hence emotional or affective) relations of humans-in-nature are viewed only as the deadened objectified processes of nature-for-humans (Whatmore, 2006). As Butler (2010) argues, we consequently no longer require a sitting judge to establish and justify every time the term ES is raised, since it becomes deliberately and invisibly stabilized as an existing and unquestioned reality which then justifies the existence of subsequent abstractions such as PES. The notion of (P)ES as performatives is related to its comparison as commodity fetishism (e.g. Kosoy and Corbera, 2010), since the latter explains how PES as a performance masks the diversity of human-nature relationships and presents them as magically stemming from market-based arrangements without history nor context. However, performativity extends beyond the description of the ways in which the performance takes place to the fetishism of how human-nature relations (more broadly) are represented as seemingly truthful or as unchallenged facts (Naeem et al., 2015). Specifically, (P)ES embeds and forcibly constrains us to justify human-nature relations according to the very same set of beliefs that lead to the destruction of nature in the first place, namely the pressure for nature to prove its profitability, or risk being regarded as wasteland and converted to more economically valuable purposes (Collard and Dempsey, 2017; Hausknost et al., 2017; Fletcher and Büscher, 2017; Matulis, 2015; Lele, 2013; McAfee, 2012; Norgaard, 2010). Hence the notion that specific types of 'nature' can both provide benefits and be perceptively

received by rational individuals seeking to maximize their utility does not by itself equate to commodification. Understanding how and why this broader neoliberal governmentality performs or fails is quite a different task than exploring why discrete activities of neoliberalization (such as commodification and trade or the voluntary nature of agreements) might succeed or fail. Performativity allows us to explore the social conventions and broader political economy of how narratives or definitions emerge and the intentions of actors who have faith in them, rather than whether any one definition is more 'ideal' than any other.

While the autonomy of the ES concept is often taken at face value as a banal object of measuring and modelling dynamic interactions and trade-offs (e.g. Robertson, 2012), it is valid to examine how such banality is established performatively through time. It is not merely that the idea of ES becomes more real through its repetition (i.e. it does not actively reproduce human-nature relations at every instance it is uttered), but that the construction of the 'true' reality of human-nature relations occurs by consciously and unconsciously reiterating or justifying the existence of ES over again (Butler, 2010). Simply defining ES or PES in one way or another is insufficient to understand performativity; rather, it is the set of relations and rationalities associated with these metaphors that are continuously circulated and which serve to liberate or constrain the agency of actors to articulate human-nature relations. Performatives can thus be differentiated between: a) the process by which phenomena (e.g. human-nature relations) can be explained or constructed as a type of reality (e.g. ES) and b) an external reality comprised of a set of contingent circumstances that fortuitously make such constructed realities 'happen'. Thus, while PES and the underlying ES framework may be modelled on a broader neoliberal tendency towards the accumulation of new forms of (natural) capital (e.g. Fletcher and Büscher, 2017), they do not

create or bring uniform neoliberal effects into being (Hausknot et al., 2017; Matulis, 2015; McElwee 2012; McAfee and Shapiro, 2012). Rather, and most crucially, they function as neoliberal performatives, whereby neoliberal effects can potentially occur ‘if and only if certain felicitous conditions are met’ (Butler, 2010: 152). In this sense, redefining PES in recognizing the failure of PES to ‘perform’ as the market does need not reduce the neoliberal effects of PES insofar as neoliberal rationalities continue to be reproduced and remain unchallenged.

Our major concern is that the (P)ES debate tends to be framed within the former type of performative, whereby ‘ideal type’ human-nature imaginaries are culturally construed to produce the same phenomena they are attempting to describe. For instance, when we model ES to examine trade-offs between them, we essentially participate in the making of what we find since we place faith that the entirely constructed reality (e.g. that of a singular and essentialized human-nature relationship) actually works to describe the world we seek to understand. In other words, we inadvertently give the neoliberal ES performative *agency* to socially construct the world to make things happen in preordained ways and which attempt to make an external reality conform to the theory constructed (Law and Urry, 2004). We may differ and bicker in our diverse epistemological readings of how PES ought to be defined (e.g. more socially-inclusive or more efficiency-oriented), but by doing so we are merely participating in the patterning of a singular human-nature relation (Butler, 2010). Accordingly, we are unable to ‘see’ the neoliberal governmentality pervasive within the PES construct because we can only explore new possibilities from the unconscious acceptance of the cultural construction itself (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Law, 2004).

Performatives as cultural constructions are not limited to flawlessly reproducing human-nature relations but also depend critically on failures as a necessary part of willing a

human-nature relation into being. For instance, the argument that PES is not based upon market relations and therefore should not be brandished as neoliberal (e.g. Corbera, 2015; Wunder, 2015; Sandbrook et al., 2013; Muradian and Gómez-Baggethun, 2013) is an increasingly employed ‘non-performative’. Sara Ahmed (2005) claims that non-performatives are failures to perform in ways that are paradoxically intended by the speech act. The danger of stating that PES is not market-based is to mask the underlying governmentality which *tends* towards a market arrangement that never ideally materializes in practice (Fletcher and Breitling, 2012). In turn, the utterance of PES as ‘not market-based’ becomes a performative itself and works by failing to bring about the effects that it names (Ahmed, 2005). The underlying rationalities of the (P)ES framework can then continue undeterred in the mission to translate the construction of a reality into the emergence of a set of preordained effects. Understanding PES as a performative act allows us to differentiate between the constructed realities we conjure from the actual kinds of effects that emerge (Law and Urry, 2004). In the following section, we illustrate the rationalities underpinning (P)ES which signify its role as a neoliberal performative.

III The making of a ‘functional’ PES

The (P)ES narrative emerged shortly after the release of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment in 2005, drawing on a managerial framing for understanding the links between the environment and human well-being (MA, 2005). While this framing has been immensely beneficial as a pedagogical tool to illustrate societal dependence on ecological life-support systems, it is only one of many potential framings, as argued elsewhere (Kolinjivadi et al., 2017; Barnaud and Antona, 2014; Kosoy and Corbera, 2010; Muradian et al., 2010; Norgaard, 2010; Raymond et al., 2013). Yet it has often been

adopted in a positivist and ‘value-neutral’ way without critical reflection on the epistemological basis upon which it was constructed (Dempsey and Robertson, 2012; Ernstson and Sörlin, 2013; Forsyth, 2015; Gómez-Baggethun et al., 2010; Lele, 2013; Van Hecken et al., 2015a). An ecosystem service can only be a ‘service’ if it is perceived first and foremost to be beneficial and, secondly, as a product of nature’s production and hence socially-validated as such. However, it remains unclear how such validation takes place and through which methodologies (Pasgaard et al., 2017; Tadaki et al., 2015; Büscher et al., 2012). Moreover, ES is not necessarily compatible with a plethora of other possible alternative human-nature ontologies, many of which are not even afforded the epistemic ‘space’ to be articulated (Sullivan, 2009). As Raymond et al. (2013) have illustrated, a number of other metaphors exist which represent how communities construct their relationship with the non-human world, yet tend to be forgotten when a particular metaphor comes to align with a dominant cultural worldview.

The conceptualization of ES itself implies a principle of separation between natural ecosystems and human societies, in which it is presumed there is somehow a nature ‘out there’ which furnishes humans (who are out of it) with benefits (Van Hecken et al., 2015b; Barnaud and Antona, 2014; Bromley, 2012; Whatmore, 2006; Bookchin, 1985). Such thoughts are deeply rooted in the 17th-century philosophical leanings of René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Francis Bacon and others who encouraged a separation between the mind and the body to harness science and technical knowledge for the domination and control of what is ‘out there’ to elevate humans as ‘masters and possessors of nature’ (Bavington, 2002; Bourdeau, 2004; Federici, 2004; Moore, 2016). This dualistic division in human-nature relationships became increasingly consolidated between the 15th and 18th centuries in not only materially shaping ontologies of what ‘is’ nature, but also

epistemologically in better understanding nature through classification and measurement (Moore, 2016). The result of this division between the human mind and the biophysical ‘other’ paves the way for socialized constructions of nature as ‘ecosystem services’ whereby processes of nature are seen as valuable to humankind, separate from it, and hence subject to control.

Why does Cartesian dualism matter for (P)ES? It is the deconstruction of nature and its reification into ES as discrete objects whose procurement and trade-offs in delivery could be viewed as an applied technical science in its own right (e.g. Börner et al., 2016; Naeem et al., 2015), which illustrates the link. ES enacts Cartesian dualism by working to sediment specific relational constructs of how (some) people construct or deconstruct the natural world. The consequence is that the framework benefits *some* people who identify *some* natures as providing *some* services by framing human-nature relations as a technical problem to be addressed through expert-driven science, primarily from the Global North (Kolinjivadi et al., 2017; Dempsey, 2016; Sullivan, 2009). Ironically, the ES framework was partly introduced to counter the otherwise dualistic tendency of biodiversity conservation to separate humans from ‘pristine’ nature, which was deemed as a failure to motivate policy-makers, since it left communities out of the picture (Dempsey, 2016). However, the introduction of ES towards nature’s benefits to humanity never escaped Cartesian dualistic tendencies despite bringing people in, since its purpose was wholly political, to engage with economic valuation by speaking in a language that the wider political-economy operates in (Dempsey, 2016). The de facto application of ES, and by turns PES defined by specifying terms like *service beneficiaries and users*, forecloses the eco-social value sets of individuals whose ways of living are intricately associated with nature, with minimal distinction between human and non-human life (Ioris, 2014).

Rather than categorizing nature as an unproblematic phenomenon separate from humans, an active politics of ‘what is nature’ reveals diverse ontological contestation of how other-than-human agents (e.g. fish, rocks, rivers, fruit) participate in enacting environmental worlds and hence result in multiple ‘natures’ (Port and Mol, 2015; Collard et al., 2015). From this perspective, nature is not an inert object to be acted upon, but brings relationships of care and attention between people and the living and non-living world into being (Bird-David, 1992). For the Huichol indigenous peoples, for instance, a series of rock formations along the Nayarit Coast of Mexico serve as the life-force for the people, the existence of which forms the basis by which life’s existence becomes ‘worlded’ or experienced (López Regalado, 2015). Elsewhere, the contestation of multiple natures explains the miscommunication between conservationists and the Bajau peoples of Indonesia in relation to blast fishing of coral reefs (Pauwelussen, 2015). Forest communities in Odisha, India, cultivate relationships of unconditional love to degraded forests in similar language to intimate human-to-human relations (Singh, 2015). These examples illustrate that an ontological politics of ‘what is nature’ inevitably underpins the uneven ways that farmers, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, nomads, economists and engineers enact their human-nature relationships. It is therefore imperative to identify and engage with the production of multiple natures to understand how they relate, whether they conflict, co-exist, interfere or merge into new forms (Pauwelussen, 2015). From this wider lens, it would appear illegitimate to a priori adopt a position that the ES framing and the commensurability of capital (inclusive of an all-encompassing ‘nature’ as natural capital) can be presumed to be universal ways of articulating human-nature relationships.

The making of a measurable and governable nature through ES is only one side of what makes a PES ‘functional’ (e.g. Wunder, 2015).

The other side resides in the unequivocal faith in the hegemony of utilitarian ethics which characterizes modern society. This perspective posits that every individual is intrinsically motivated by their own personal gain and will thus always adopt the most rational choice to maximize their own utility. This simplified and calculative view of what it means to be a human being can be explained by the logic that the individual is most efficient in processing information which aligns to their own self-interest (Henrich et al., 2005; Fehr and Falk, 2002). As Wunder (2013: 232) claims: ‘if the economics of willingness to pay (WTP) and willingness to accept (WTA) do not square, there is no basis for PES’. This logic directly implies that conservation must pay for itself by putting more money on the table than any other environmentally degrading activity and that this can *only* happen if payments outweigh opportunity costs of individuals who could potentially provide ES. In other words, PES forces us ‘to see the world in an essentially neoliberal way’ since ‘conservation is and needs to be tied to the very forces and logics that degrade and destroy nature in the first place’ (Fletcher and Büscher, 2017: 229). However, in adopting this logic, it is clear that conservation has not (and arguably cannot) provide more money on the table than other more lucrative land-use practices, since otherwise nature, conceived as ES, would have already been safeguarded (Fletcher et al., 2016; McAfee, 2012).

The (P)ES imaginary used to frame environmental problems in terms of externalities suggests that only appeals to self-interested behaviour can be expected to paradoxically engender relationships of care and responsibility for nature (Van Hecken and Bastiaensen, 2010; Bowles, 2008). The conditionality aspect, often cited as being a key distinguishing feature of PES (Wunder, 2005; 2015), stipulates that payments must add value to conservation. This most important requirement of PES essentially reduces what could be an embodied

human-nature relationship based upon affect, care and diverse in meaning and subjectivity, into merely establishing opportunity cost equivalencies for squaring off self-interest with nature provision (Singh, 2015). Moreover, the definition of a ‘unit of nature’ as an ES to be potentially negotiated between ‘users’ or ‘providers’ renders some ‘natures’ more valuable, more enterprising, and more important than others which, in turn, become less worthy of consideration (Robertson, 2012). By reverting to opportunity cost, it is clear that these more enterprising natures prove their value in economic terms alone, while violating those whose worldviews do not fit with nature as self-interest (Dempsey and Robertson, 2012; Dempsey, 2016).

When PES is espoused as a ‘functional’ alternative to other environmental policies (e.g. Wunder, 2015), the neoliberal governmentality which constructs nature as ES to be exchanged by rational self-interested ‘users’ and ‘providers’ gets performed. The stipulation that payments must be conditional to agreed-upon land-use changes (which might ideally lead to ES provision) can only work if both those promoting and responding to PES agreements consciously or unconsciously internalize the underlying social conventions and political structures which make such an understanding valid (Bastian, 2012). As alluded to by Butler (2010), each time an abstracted narrative is uttered, an interpretative process selects a particular frame from the broader constellation of social and symbolic imaginaries in an *attempt* to produce an effect. In this manner, if we recognize that the process of making PES ‘functional’ is a neoliberal performative act, we can better reflect upon the network of actors, institutions and processes which make or construct PES to produce neoliberal effects, even if breakdowns in the performative occur and are constitutive of the performative act itself. In other words, the failure of PES to operate as a market-based arrangement does *not* mean we should ignore

the ways by which actors frame and construct PES in neoliberal ways, regardless of actual outcomes (Fletcher and Büscher, 2017). This is due to the conscious or unconscious intention to produce a market-effect in an ideal world, even if suitable conditions which might result in market-based arrangements are rarely if ever present or forthcoming. While the neoliberal performative may be less successful at producing markets, it is more likely to be successful at shifting cognitive frames towards the instrumentalization of people and nature for self-serving objectives (Pasgaard et al., 2017; Matulis, 2015; Büscher, 2014; Cowling, 2014; Büscher et al., 2012; McAfee, 2012; MacDonald, 2010; Milne and Adams, 2010; Peterson et al., 2010). Examining PES for how its neoliberal governmentality is performed is thus a necessary exercise in order to differentiate between a non-performative as constitutive of the performative operation versus a genuine failure to respond to the imposition of certain cognitive frames and which might illustrate more inspiring alternatives already in the process of being actualized.

IV Performing the ‘PES train’

The impossibility of complete abstraction is often less problematic than the real violence executed by attempted abstractions – many of which fail at least in part. (Robertson, 2012: 397)

The attempt of PES practice to perform within neoliberal logics does not depend on a single actor or a single definition over any other, but on networks of entrenched or even hegemonic socio-cultural, political, and institutional practices which pre-select possible imaginaries of human-nature relationships (Pasgaard et al., 2017; Ioris, 2014; Fairhead et al., 2012; Holmes, 2011; MacDonald, 2010; Adger et al., 2001). Brand and Vadrot (2013) refer to these practices as ‘epistemic selectivities’ which privilege certain forms of knowledge, problem perceptions

and narratives over others. Epistemic selectivities generate scientific and political self-evidence so as to reinforce the power relations of the broader political economy to which they belong. In turn, dense networks of 'expert' knowledge harness epistemic selectivities to shape shared patterns of thinking, reasoning, and behaviour within a broader epistemic community (e.g. Haas, 1992). The epistemic selectivities which coordinate the actors of the ES epistemic community, for example, require that these actors place faith in the central tenets of ES as an unequivocal and unifying lens to explain human-nature relations. Together this tightly woven transnational community meets regularly in high profile conferences, often centred around commonly-shared targets or objectives, to socially and culturally 'perform' specific human-nature rationalities (Büscher et al., 2012; Büscher, 2014; MacDonald, 2010). In doing so, epistemic communities serve as gatekeepers (e.g. Büscher et al., 2012) which preclude rationalities or imaginaries which do not conform to the cultural construct from being 'acceptable within a specific field of scientificity' (Brand and Vadrot, 2013: 220) or the ideological borders through which differentiating what is true from what is false can take place (Peck and Theodore, 2010). In the case of PES, the banality of the ES lens to render comprehensible the distinction between 'service users' and 'service providers' is spatially and temporally sedimented by epistemic communities as a means to generate the faith that the ES performative actually works.

Transnational environmental policy initiatives such as 'The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity' (TEEB), the United Nations' 'Green Economy', the Aichi Biodiversity Targets of the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the Intergovernmental Panel of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) represent the world's largest and most financed initiatives advocating for ES approaches for conservation, and crucially, express the neoliberal faith in the

'pay to conserve' rationality for ES provision (Pasgaard et al., 2017; Blanchard et al., 2016; Brand and Vadrot, 2013; Brockington, 2012; MacDonald and Corson, 2012). These initiatives come into being through diverse collaborations involving international organizations and partners (e.g. the CGIAR Consortium of International Agricultural Research Centers, etc.), development and lending agencies (e.g. World Bank, Global Environmental Facility), non-governmental organizations (e.g. WWF, IUCN, The Nature Conservancy, etc.), and academic institutions (e.g. the Natural Capital Project of Stanford University). The result is a well-networked set of global-to-local actors which follow a general tendency to invest substantial labour and energy to 'make' ES out of other potential human-nature relations and subsequently to insert economic rationalities to efficiently procure ES through PES (Hausknost et al., 2017; Collard and Dempsey, 2016; Kull et al., 2015; Robertson, 2012). For instance, Blanchard et al. (2016) identified unwavering faith in the role of market logic for advancing conservation amongst two transnational networks of conservationists sampled at different times and on opposite sides of the world. The authors found that market logic not only overpowered other logics driving the work of conservationists but was more likely to be defended the larger the relative size of the organization (measured through number of employees and operational budgets) and according to the seniority of an individual's position within the organization.

The various epistemic communities which work with and promote the ES concept have over the last 30 years tended to appropriate the value of nature for sustaining or expanding the influence of the state and for the economic benefits of marketing nature to create added value (Brand and Vadrot, 2013; West et al., 2006; Robbins, 2001). In this sense, neoliberalization does not necessarily refer to market creation so much as it has involved re-regulation to permit

economic rationalities and logics to influence the cognitive frames of human-nature relations (Wynne-Jones, 2012; McAfee and Shapiro, 2010; Castree et al., 2008). From this perspective, the hegemonic epistemic community driving the ‘PES train’ is performing neoliberal governmentality regardless of whether PES is state-directed or operated as private initiatives (Fletcher and Büscher, 2017; Matulis, 2015).

The reproduction of discursive power within epistemic communities has resulted in what Van Hecken et al. (2015a) have called ‘a self-congratulating circle of knowledge and experience generation’ (p. 60). Yet rarely is this implicit discursive power identified and scrutinized by stakeholders actually theorizing and implementing PES. Indeed, a sort of ‘revolving door’ exists between academics who establish the terms and conditions of supposedly ‘functional’ PES definitions while simultaneously serving as economic consultants and experts of multilateral development banks. For example, Stefano Pagiola of the World Bank advances the canonical definition of PES as a co-author of Engel et al. (2008), yet in a publication in the Environment Strategy Notes on PES published several years earlier by the World Bank, he and co-author Gunars Platais explain developing ‘PES systems that could help substitute for the absence of markets’ (Pagiola and Platais, 2002). The language of market-based environmental policies that the World Bank espouses in their project documents is particularly salient given that ‘no other institution has the same depth of experience in implementing PES [as the World Bank]’ (World Bank, 2005: 4).

The sentiment revealed by these authors reflects the grammar adopted by many of the main PES donors over the last decade to more recent times. Following Castree’s (2008) features of neoliberalization, Table 1 illustrates the presence of a powerful (P)ES epistemic community by identifying how neoliberal logics are clearly integrated to the way leading multilateral development banks, aid agencies, and

international conservation NGOs define PES. The table illustrates how epistemic communities have harnessed the (P)ES discourse in line with four processes of neoliberalization as defined by Castree (2008). These include: a) privatization (e.g. the establishment of private property rights to initiate ES exchanges); b) marketization (e.g. identifying the basis of ES trades according to prices which at least attempt to reflect opportunity cost recovery); c) re-regulation (e.g. introducing (P)ES policies or laws which at least encourage and support voluntary market-like solutions for ES, regardless of whether such trades materialize); and d) market facilitation (e.g. the flanking mechanisms, including resources, suitable legal or policy environments, and knowledge development by academics, NGOs, and other state and non-state actors to facilitate market-based arrangements).

It becomes clear that actors representing this powerful epistemic community attempt to recreate the ideal (neoliberal) conditions for PES to produce its intended effects. Indeed, as we argued earlier, the performative may fail in practice or become a non-performative, but this has little impact on the way neoliberalism is performed if faith, perceived as global influence and resources to fuel underlying rationalities, is continuously replenished or reproduced. Regardless of outcomes, there is always a *tendency* towards reducing the plurality of human-nature relations to those that are profitable, and by turns, to frame equity concerns within the logic of Pareto optimality whereby winners could *potentially* compensate losers to be better off than before the arrangement (Spash, 2015; Robertson, 2007). In this way, discursive power generates the performative *agency* of tightly linked epistemic communities to translate the construction of a neoliberal reading of human-nature relations into the uneven emergence of neoliberal effects in the real world.

While the table depicts the close link between processes of neoliberalization and the language espoused to define and advance PES,

Table 1. Language adopted by several key actors of the ‘PES train’, including international aid agencies, development banks and NGOs that have harnessed the (P)ES discourse in line with four processes of neoliberalization as defined by Castree (2008). Despite disclaimers that authors of in-house publications do not necessarily represent the ‘official’ views of the organization, we argue that direct association is sufficient to illustrate the neoliberal performative aspect of linked epistemic communities.

Organization/ Funder	Aspect of neoliberalization (following Castree, 2008)	Language adopted
FAO	Marketization Re-regulation	<p>‘If PES is not an efficient market-mechanism and does not adapt to reflect in time the true or perceived opportunity costs, it will not raise the stakeholders’ interest to participate in such a voluntary scheme.’ (FAO, 2011: 3)</p> <p>‘Within such a level of market intervention, the public sector is also expected to make direct investments to propel a green economy and enter the market as a buyer through public procurement, labelling, price premiums and Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES).’ (FAO, 2011: 242)</p>
World Bank	Marketization Privatization Market Facilitation	<p>The Environmental Services Project by developing ‘PES markets’ calls for support from the GEF for: ‘innovative market incentive structures (such as demand and supply side interventions, certification of suppliers, purchasing agreements, codes of conduct) that would catalyze market forces.’ (World Bank, 2005: 6)</p> <p>‘A key determinant in establishing a successful PES system is the economic value of the ecosystem service itself.’ (World Bank, 2007: 11)</p> <p>‘Once information about the value of ecosystem services is delivered to individual and corporate users, a national program can become more sustainable by allowing for the integration of full and direct private investment.’ ‘Integrating the private sector into public programs begins the process of moving to 100% private finance.’ (World Bank, 2012: 122–3)</p> <p>‘Public PES programs that are able to link beneficiaries of ecosystem services with producers of ecosystem services can help support future buyer-seller relationships unique from public programs.’ (World Bank, 2012: 123)</p>
Asian Development Bank	Re-regulation Marketization Privatization	<p>‘In the backdrop of PES is the broader vision of creating the institutional foundations necessary to engender ecosystem service markets.’ (Scherr and Bennett, 2011: 1)</p> <p>‘... valuation, i.e. the estimation of the economic value, or the monetization, of ecosystem service flows is important for the initial development of a PES scheme, for example, by helping to determine whether a scheme can be cost-effective and therefore worth developing.’ (Scherr and Bennett, 2011: 2)</p> <p>‘... many governments internationally have been making a shift from a centralized regulatory approach to environmental governance to greater emphasis on decentralized, flexible</p>

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Organization/ Funder	Aspect of neoliberalization (following Castree, 2008)	Language adopted
USAID	Marketization	mechanisms that allow for the private sector to be a provider of public goods and services, and that allow for the development of public-private partnerships. To some extent, this is not unlike trends in the privatization of other public goods and services, such as utilities, telephone and postal services.' (Scherr and Bennett, 2011: 11) '... opportunity costs for service providers will depend on the specific land uses they are asked to adopt. Therefore, an ad hoc payment structure will rarely work in the long run. Instead, PES programs must conduct careful analysis to estimate values of the environmental services they are going to secure.' (USAID PES Sourcebook, 2007)
GEF	Marketization	'The example of high-volume water users illustrates that the conditions to create a 'market' between buyers and providers will only occur if the PES presents to the buyer a solution equal or less costly than the cost of water storage infrastructure.' (GEF, 2014: 15).
IUCN	Re-regulation Marketization	'An appropriate legislative framework which regulates public PES schemes has the potential to stimulate the development of trustworthy markets and to ensure good governance.' (Greiber, 2009: xiii) 'Once these services are valued and linked to markets, ecosystem health can become a collective interest for upstream stewards and downstream water users.' (Greiber, 2009: 6)
WWF	Marketization Privatization Market Facilitation	'What land-holders have to do to provide these commoditized services varies according to the scheme and the service but may involve refraining from certain types of activity such as pesticide use, maintaining natural forests or vegetation, or carrying out specific activities such as tree planting.' (Gutman, 2003: 29) 'Secure resource tenure-formalization of natural resource rights is essential to give marginalized groups control over, and rights to returns from environmental services.' (Gutman, 2003: 37) 'Establish a market support center. To improve poor people's ability to participate in emerging markets, a central support center could offer free access to market information, and an advice bureau could support the design and implementation of contracts.' (Gutman, 2003: 37)

establishment of the link can only illustrate the discursive power of epistemic communities. Ultimately, it matters very little to describe the ways by which PES is articulated, discursively

expressed in practice, or classified according to one definition or another. This is due to the fact that none of these approaches permit us to explore other possibilities beyond the confines

of the patterns by which the neoliberal performative is itself crafted (Ferguson, 2009; Gibson-Graham, 2008). Instead, much greater insight may be gained in exploring the ways in which neoliberal imaginaries simply fail to produce what they anticipate (Butler, 2010). Since theoretical ideal-types only bring into being the arrangements they describe under certain ‘lucky’ conditions in which people and nature behave exactly as predicted, any inverse effects might unsettle seemingly stable or ‘functional’ constructs as being something ‘performed’. In other words, the failure of reality to conform to theory allows us to loosen our faith somewhat in the ‘sovereign agency’ we otherwise would give to epistemic communities who engage in constructing the neoliberal performative (Butler, 2010).

It is crucial to clarify that performatives differ from actual reality in the sense that performatives can and always will fail, but can only produce effects in the real world if they are reiterated continuously to generate the faith that they are characteristic of actual reality (Butler, 2010). Thus, if we fail to see breakdowns of the performative as constitutive of the performative process itself, it will become difficult to avoid merely redirecting or furthering specific patterns of shaping or constructing reality within a given cognitive frame rather than exploring alternative frames altogether. Interestingly, relatively few studies on PES focus explicitly on uncovering these alternative frames. Instead, research has tended to further pattern the (P)ES performative by scanning the world to explore the reiteration of faith in ‘functional’ neoliberal natures (e.g. Wunder, 2015) or as faith in opposing neoliberal natures as ‘selling nature to save it’ (e.g. Fletcher and Büscher, 2017). In both cases, the gap between constructed realities and actual effects that emerge is of less concern than patterning the performative itself. In what follows, we describe the implications of what escaping the engagement of the neoliberal performative means for PES.

V Beyond the (neoliberalizing) performative

There are four implications of understanding PES as a neoliberal performative. The first is that continued faith in strictly economic logics and values of human-nature relations will always find new ways to ‘perform’ the neoliberal act, regardless of how many times PES fails to materialize as ‘functionally’ defined. This means that defending or abandoning the notion of PES as a ‘market-based instrument’ (e.g. Wunder, 2015) does not relinquish us from the responsibility of exploring how a neoliberal governmentality manifests in other, perhaps more insidious, ways than the effect of market relations. For instance, the conception of functional or utility-bearing ‘services’ depicts nature as a productive machine whose output can be aligned with the self-interested behaviour of actors (Robertson, 2012). This position remains firmly within a Western philosophical tradition of viewing nature as an objectified body, devoid of agency, to be strictly instrumentalized for the purposes of justifying and expanding a world of people and nature as inputs for production.

The second is to avoid patterning neoliberal performatives in new or more innovative ways. While exploring the unintended effects of (P)ES interventions is crucial, we must not be led astray in characterizing the messiness of PES in practice as the performative act getting ‘twisted’ to fit local contexts (e.g. Corbera, 2015; Shapiro-Garza, 2013, Rodríguez-de-Francisco et al., 2013; Osborne, 2011). In doing so, we remain devoted to the performative itself by latching on to how it manifests itself as a non-performative. Specifically, by focusing on the act of *adapting*, *re-working*, or *shifting* of PES, the focus shifts towards the agency of actors rather than on the structural constraints by which such agency is permitted to operate (Martin et al., 2014; Cleaver, 2012). In other words, less emphasis is placed on the (il)legitimacy of the neoliberal performative itself than

on the capacity of actors to articulate the same performative act in their own words (Kovacic and Giampietro, 2015). Framing the diversity of PES applications in practice as non-performative serves merely to pattern the performative in new and creative ways, much as the claim that PES is not a market has failed to halt its underlying neoliberal governmentality. Instead, it may be more useful to illustrate when, how and why neoliberal performatives fail to produce intended effects, rather than limiting research aims to hybridized manifestations of the performative itself (e.g. state-driven versus ‘market-like’ PES).

In a somewhat paradoxical claim, the third implication is that outright rejection of neoliberal natures has a performative effect in itself and should be recognized as such. This deconstructing performative refers to the work and energy of the critical geography epistemic community to dismantle the worlding of neoliberal natures (e.g. Fletcher and Büscher, 2017; Sullivan, 2013; Büscher et al., 2012; Fletcher, 2012; Robertson, 2012; Roth and Dressler, 2012; Brockington and Duffy, 2010). While we applaud and indeed contribute to efforts in deconstructing the ‘selling nature to save it’ trope, we must carefully reflect on the intrinsically political aspects of defending politics through economic determinism by paying closer attention to how politics and economics are mutually constituted (Battistoni, 2016). In this sense, the material and energy (i.e. life-force) of those working to unravel hegemonic neoliberal performatives is itself underpinned by a political agenda seeking to shift or at least diversify distinctions in human-nature relations. While this statement might be accepted as a given, our point is that there is little value in continuing to polarize political relations from economic ones when it is clear that they are interdependent. Indeed, it is the very same separation between politics and economics that the neoliberal performative relies on in discursively creating a world of instrumentalized

nature which can be exchanged by ‘users’ and ‘providers’. A performativity lens allows us to go beyond dismantling any and every neoliberal policy or initiative the moment it threatens a rather essentialized notion of what plural human-nature relations are. Instead, both the agency of actors to modify rules *and* the structural power of neoliberal logics in shaping courses of action are more likely to exist as a dialectic continuum rather than as diametrically opposed bedfellows (Van Hecken et al., 2015b; Cleaver, 2012). The potential to transcend neoliberal logics may thus lie in exploring the relational entanglements of human-nature subjectivities continuously being renewed, reconfigured, and brought into being (Haraway, 2016; Cleaver and De Koning, 2015; Singh, 2015; Hall et al., 2014; Bastian, 2012; Ferguson, 2009; Sparke, 2008; Hart, 2006; Whatmore, 2006).

The fourth implication of understanding (P)ES from a performativity lens refers to the potential to escape the further patterning of the neoliberal performative. One clue comes from Derrida’s (1994) idea of ‘originary performatives’ which, he argues, offer ‘forces of rupture’ not as fully-fledged performatives in themselves but as emergent potentials to inspire people to actualize creative responses to the politically powerful epistemic selectivities which result in performative acts. For feminist anthropologist Anna Tsing, they are the yet-unexplored axes of human and non-human interactions (Gan, 2016). They may also be the unintended ‘novelties’ deriving from performative acts that fail to produce material effects (Ferguson, 2009). These ruptures result from the multifaceted experiences of individuals in a relational interaction with other humans-in-nature (Olivier de Sardan, 2013; Ballet et al., 2007). It is thus the social embeddedness of human action and behaviour that explains individual agency, or the capability of individuals to be the ‘originators of acts’ (Cleaver, 2012: 117). The key lies in identifying relational

experiences which ‘trouble’ dominant conventions or intransigent patterns of thought, yet beg for greater exploration, even as they begin to blur boundaries between reality and the imaginary (Haraway, 2016).

For instance, a San Francisco-based initiative known as the ‘Guerrilla Grafters’ cultivates interactions of nature and relations of care among urban residents by grafting fruit-bearing branches to non-fruit bearing ornamental fruit trees as a way of reanimating new forms of socio-nature interactions on city streets (Haughwot, 2017). Extending beyond the rational logics of ‘resource to be exploited’ or ‘service provisioning’, these new socionature interactions composite still unknown performativities in the making. Elsewhere, Battistoni (2016) suggests alternative forms of collective subjectivity between humans and nature, not through instrumental relationships to maintain human well-being, but as political comrades of the labour force in recognition of the mutual dependence, reciprocity and solidarity required to reproduce life-supporting conditions on earth. A labour perspective, she argues, would require that working conditions be continuously renegotiated and deliberated upon in order to establish how both humans and nonhumans might be compensated or recognized for their otherwise unpaid contributions to a living world. Singh (2015) similarly argues that rather than paying people to produce new forms of capital (e.g. nature) through PES, we might envision paying nature instead through caring labour of affect, nurturing, or gift giving that would somehow reciprocate the life-sustaining, yet unrecognized, gifts provided by nature. This outcome of conservation care labour may emerge as an *unconscious* defiance to neoliberal performative acts. In the Kyrgyz Republic, for instance, targeted communities eschewed payments between service ‘users’ and ‘providers’ as championed by an EU-funded regional NGO which sought to establish a PES pilot in the country (Kolinjivadi et al., 2016). Instead, local actors felt that those who benefit from water

quality should provide their own labour to rehabilitate overgrazed areas. The result of the PES intervention ironically resulted in a collective action arrangement in which upstream mushroom pickers and downstream water users were perceived as part of the same community.

VI Conclusion

The recognition of (P)ES as a neoliberal performative offers a novel lens through which to understand how more or less valuable natures are defined and constructed as well as the networked sets of actors who work tirelessly to actualize a neoliberal governmentality. We highlight five contributions that a performativity lens offers for PES scholarship: a) it explores neoliberalization as an underlying governmentality rather than just an outcome (e.g. commodification of nature); b) it makes an empirical call to redirect attention to how and why a particular governmentality succeeds or fails in practice, rather than remaining fixated on critiquing the search for surplus value from nature; c) it sheds light on recent attempts to clarify the PES definition, arguing that academic bickering over definitions risks patterning cultural constructs further, while distracting attention from how these abstractions gain the agency to (ideally) produce material effects; d) it highlights the importance of recognizing breakdown in cultural constructions as constitutive of a process of cultural construction, and e) it offers scope for recognizing alternative frames which transcend the temptation to pattern a cultural construction in new, even opposing ways.

In sum, performativity provides a cognitive frame to better identify the ways in which certain worldviews are actively being constructed and patterned, while simultaneously serving as a source of rupture for emergent human-nature relationalities which manifest outside of a particular worldview. Critically, it also opens the possibility for dislocating hegemonic human-nature relations beyond merely patterning such

relations in more novel or innovative ways. The realization that discursive representations of human-nature relations actively bring them into existence affords a certain kind of responsibility on the part of academics who participate in the worlding of socionature in one direction or another (Gibson-Graham, 2008). In the case of (P)ES, exploring the human capacity to affect and be affected by nature opens the door to diverse and continuously renewed subjectivities that might diminish the performative potential of the ‘PES train’. Such affective relationalities do not see human-nature interactions as ‘give and take’ compensations for otherwise burdensome chores, but as life-affirming and joyful experiences in themselves. Our point is that alternative relationalities may lie under the surface of seemingly neoliberal imaginaries waiting to unsettle faith in the carefully constructed world within which the ‘PES train’ belongs. Transcending structural power while enhancing the agency of actors to enact their human and non-human worlds requires that we understand the conservation of nature as an embodied practice, rather than as a performative act within disciplined and dichotomized political-economic relations.

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