Introduction

Raison d'être of This Book

It was late afternoon on an August day in 1998. I, at that time an undergraduate student of anthropology, was sitting with Anton on his family *pokos* – meadows used for hay production – taking a little break from hand-mowing the grass with long-handled scythes. The *pokos* was sparsely wooded, with solitary larch trees on its lower slopes. The forest thickened as one climbed. Anton was judging the number and size of other people's haycocks on the opposite slopes of the valley to better estimate how much hay we would end up with. Suddenly, we felt a slight vibration, and the horizon above the hills opposite us turned orange and pink as if the sun was already setting. It looked quite ominous to me. If the nuclear Third World War were to break out, I thought, we would notice it in exactly this way. Anton was not pleased either. He explained that a piece of rocket debris must have fallen somewhere in Ulagan Raion,[1] a phenomenon that occurred from time to time. He went on to name some distant areas he knew from hunting expeditions where he thought the debris may have landed. We discussed the issue a bit further, but as the refulgence slowly faded away we went back to work, and my sore palms and shoulders, unaccustomed to mowing, quickly overwhelmed my thoughts of catastrophe.

This was, in a nutshell, my introduction to the phenomenon of debris from rockets launched from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in

FIGURE 0.1. Anton's *pokos* is sparsely wooded, with solitary larch trees on its lower slopes. The forest thickens as one climbs. © Ludek Broz

Kazakhstan falling in the Altai Republic, an administrative unit within the Russian Federation that borders Kazakhstan, Mongolia and China (see Figure 0.2). Witnessing that rocket fall was less of a coincidence than it might seem. Studying ethnology in Prague in the late 1990s made me susceptible to some rather outdated anthropological tenets and aspirations. With a lust for the exotic *other*, I inevitably ended up in one of the remote areas of Siberia – Ulagan Raion in the Altai Republic. Its infrastructure was poor, and its small population consisted predominantly of indigenous Altaians speaking what was at that time for me an incomprehensible dialect of Altaian, a Turkic language, instead of the more familiar Slavic Russian that is fairly close to my native Czech. Rocket debris likewise seemed to be attracted to Ulagan Raion, but the reasons underlying our shared attraction were nevertheless quite different. Instead of the cultural and linguistic *otherness* that had drawn me in, it was the low density of human population that led to Ulagan Raion being selected as the location for two rocket fallout zones back in the Soviet days.

Studying the predicament of life in a rocket debris fallout zone sounds like an excellent anthropological topic now, but back in my early undergraduate years I was not able to see that, because I was untouched by the conceptual shift in our discipline's atten-
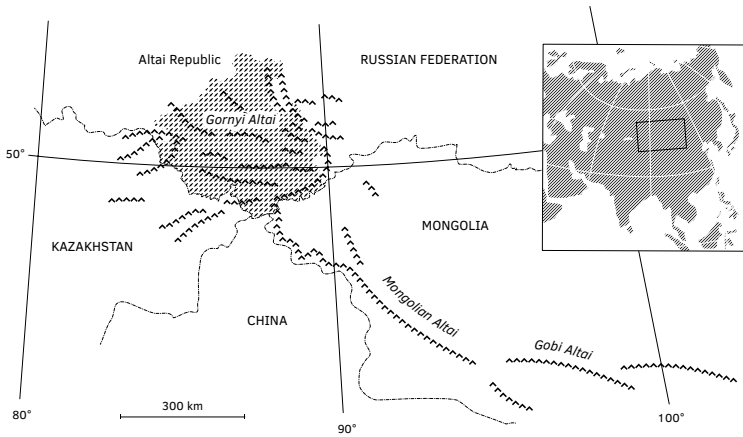
FIGURE 0.2. The Altai Republic is an administrative unit within the Russian Federation that borders Kazakhstan, Mongolia and China. Geographically speaking, the Altai Republic is in the Gornyi Altai mountain range, south of which is the Mongolian Altai, followed by the Gobi Altai. © Ondřej Fučík

tion from the 'exotic other' towards the 'suffering subject' (see Robbins 2013). An aspiring adept of culturalist analysis, I found the falling rocket debris more nerve-wracking than intellectually stimulating. The omnipresent rumours of the toxicity of leftover fuel – *geptil* – seeping from the debris sounded very convincing, especially when reinforced by the desperate head of the local hospital, who pointed out what was, in his view, the disproportionately high cancer rate in the region and linked it directly to the rocket fuel. What fruit would my attention to rocket junk bear if I had no intention of becoming a toxicologist, epidemiologist, medical doctor or environmental activist?

Naive as it was, my failure to see Altaians' health concerns regarding *geptil* as an obvious anthropological topic nevertheless exposes a grander problem in our discipline's foundations. This problem was aptly described by Mary Douglas, who observed that, as of the early 1970s, anthropologists typically divide 'other people's causal theories . . . into two sets: those which accord with our own and need no special explanation, and those which are magical and based on subjective associations' (1975: 276). The
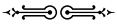
latter set is the proper object of study in anthropology, understood as an intellectual project concerned with alterity (Holbraad 2012a). Often, those magic-based explanations are presumed to be so fallacious that 'the only thing that needs explanation is how people have managed to believe it and expect others to believe it' (Geertz 1973a: 22). In such cases, the anthropologist's task is as much to explain as it is to advocate for those who hold such apparently irrational beliefs. This, however, was hardly the case with rocket remnants, as my informants' claims about the potential health risks seemed disturbingly reasonable and convincing, calling for action rather than patronizing explanation.

It is therefore not surprising that during my undergraduate ethnographic encounter with Ulagan, my research focus was not on rockets, despite the strong impression that both the actual fall I had witnessed and the local discourse on *geptil* made on me. When Anton offered a white ribbon to the *jerdiŋ eezi* – the spirit-master of the land – at the beginning of our haymaking, or when he told me what to do or not to do to avoid disgruntling the spirits, I felt I was touching upon the anthropological subject proper. Later, when I was a doctoral student at Cambridge, preparing for a full year of research in Altai, the issue of spirits suddenly surfaced in a way that was as spectacular as the rocket fall. In September 2003, the Ulagan and Kosh-Agach raions of the Altai Republic were hit by a major earthquake that measured 7.3 on the Richter scale. Desperately getting in touch with my friends to find out how they were coping and whether I could help in any way, I soon realized the earthquake was for many of them much more than a geological phenomenon with calamitous effects on their lives. It coincided with the tenth anniversary of the remarkable find of 2,500-year-old mummified female body that was soon nicknamed the 'Altai Princess' and whose unearthing and relocation to Novosibirsk by archaeologists caused a bitter rift between the discipline of archaeology and the people of the republic. 'People say', one of my friends kept repeating over the shaky telephone line, 'the earthquake has a connection to spirits disturbed by taking away the princess'. The message sounded all the more urgent as aftershocks kept hitting the region.

During my doctoral research (2004–2005), I pretty much stuck to the classic anthropological canon as I dealt with and eventually published on themes such as the local perception of archaeology,

hunting, land-oriented worship and conversion to Christianity (see, for example, Broz 2007, 2009a, 2009b; Broz and Willerslev 2012). The issue of rocket debris and its concomitant *geptil* pollution, however, never disappeared from my radar screen. In 2006 a rumour reached me that foreign scientists were looking into the health consequences of rocket debris disposal in the Altai Republic. In 2010 the journal *Health, Risk & Society* published two complementary articles dealing with this issue, written by overlapping collectives of authors led by specialists from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (Profeta, Goncharova et al. 2010; Profeta, Rechel et al. 2010).

The research presented in the two articles 'emerged from a meeting with representatives of the Altai population where concern was expressed about the hazards from falling rockets (from both direct impacts and, especially, contamination)' (Profeta, Goncharova et al. 2010: 194). The study, however, exclusively addresses the topic of the 'perception of risk/hazard'. My friend Anton, or anyone else residing in the vicinity of one of the fallout zones, would learn from the study that local people are suspicious of official information that downplays the possible harm caused by rocket remnants, something that was common knowledge and arguably the main reason why people eagerly expressed their concerns when speaking to independent experts from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Furthermore, the local Altaian would learn that 'it can plausibly be argued that it is the process of communicating information about the launches that is the problem, in a setting where many problems have their roots in the general social and economic situation, with the launches acting, in effect, as a focus for their concerns' (ibid.: 207–8). In other words, she/he would find out that the widespread distress Altaians feel is in fact caused by general socio-economic problems such as poverty and alcoholism, and that worrying about rocket debris is but a convenient way to voice that distress. What is more, information about rockets tends to amplify the distress, as 'people who believe it is important to obtain information on the environment, who obtain that information from official sources and who are dissatisfied with the information they receive are more likely to be concerned about launches and to have symptoms' (Profeta, Goncharova et al. 2010: 205).
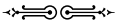
Hence, an inhabitant of the fallout zone would understand from the two articles that, partly due to the incompetent PR of the Russian space agency and fully in line with the opinion of Russian specialists, she/he suffers from *raketofobia* ('rocketophobia'). Interestingly enough, while Russian experts who are quoted from time to time in local media reach such diagnoses by referring to the results of environmental pollution analyses that purportedly find no harmful effects from the rocket debris, the two articles in the spotlight are quite different in that respect. By focusing on the 'perception of risk/hazard', they leave the actual rocket debris, *geptil* pollution and its effects out of focus, if not entirely out of the picture. Information about *geptil* is given in a text box set apart from the rest of the article layout, as if bracketed from the topic addressed. In the articles, *raketofobia* is characterized as a pathological medical condition completely detached from the rocket debris, just as Lacanian pathological jealousy is independent of actually being cheated on by the partner (Žižek 2006: 294). I expect that the inhabitants of the rocket fallout zone would be rather disappointed with the conclusions of the two articles: the researchers had conducted no sampling or follow-up toxicological and epidemiological analysis, which is something people in the affected areas had really hoped independent researchers would do.

The logic of the two public health articles should also ring a bell with fellow anthropologists, especially those working in the anthropology of religion. Conventionally, anthropologists interested in occult phenomena do not understand them in the same way as their informants – that is, as occult phenomena per se (Gell 1999a: 161). While occult phenomena and supernatural entities may feature in our ethnographies in the form of our interlocutors' words referring to spirits, demons or souls, it is always explained as something else being made manifest: social solidarity, the evil forces of capitalism, by-products of our evolutionarily evolved cognitive capacities, socialized grief, or local notions of probability. Reading the twin articles about rocket debris in Altai, I see the same diversion at work. The public health researchers who authored the study at stake speak in a sophisticated way about social imagery, about fear of rockets as a way to express the distress associated with the harsh living conditions of the Sibe-

rian periphery, which is undergoing the painful process of socio-economic transition. The physical rocket parts and toxic pollution are largely absent from the analysis. Had the authors been investigating the alleged role of spirits in the 2003 earthquake, their analysis could have been essentially the same.

There seems to be a parallel in how the public health researchers directed their attention with regard to informants' concerns and explanations and how, according to Mary Douglas' quote above, anthropologists direct their attention. Besides concerns with toxic rocket debris, another acute worry expressed by my informants is connected to archaeology (with the 2003 earthquake being a perfect case in point). In fact, they talk about both archaeology and the space industry in very similar terms that recall the concept of *negative externality* as developed in sociology and economics: both activities are economically beneficial for the parties that initiate them, but they also generate negative externalities – that is, the costs of the negative consequences are externalized and borne by people who do not stand to gain from the economic transactions associated with those activities (in this case, the inhabitants of Ulagan Raion). While rocket remnants allegedly emit toxic *geptil*, archaeological excavations allegedly release evil spirits (see Broz 2011). As I will demonstrate throughout this book, the effects of these chemical and occult agents are, according to my human informants, very similar: they include illness and even death via disease, suicide or other means. Local concerns with archaeology are discussed so vociferously that they even reach the international media almost as often (or as rarely) as news about rocket fragments falling in Altai.[2] In other words, it is almost impossible for researchers working in the region to ignore or avoid the issue of archaeology (see, for example, Halemba 2008; Jacquemoud 2015; Maslov 2006; Plets et al. 2013), hence the team of public health specialists almost certainly encountered people expressing worries connected to archaeology. It is important to note that the specialists responded only to local anxieties regarding hazards linked to rocket debris. That seems logical at first glance, given the focus of public health as a discipline and the stated goal of the research team, but less so when considering the fact that in its published form the study ultimately deals with 'perception' only. Somewhat paradoxically, while the actual pres-

ence and potential health impacts of physical rocket fragments and *geptil* are effectively absent from the methodology and data presented in the articles, the analysis – which I would dub an 'epidemiology of unfounded worries' – nevertheless focuses on and indeed is limited to worries *about* those rocket fragments and *geptil* – that is, precisely those items that justified the research as part of a public health inquiry in the first place.

Anthropologists, for their part, have traditionally been inclined to be equally selective in focusing their attention, only in the opposite direction. Entities that appeared magic or occult, such as spirits, often attracted them to a given place and directed their attention only to be always bypassed, explained away or otherwise left out of the anthropological analysis. In other words, just as the public health specialists did with the rocket debris, anthropologists have denied such entities serious attention while simultaneously allowing those entities to frame the research agenda.

There are, however, important differences, too. No doubt, we can find numerous studies in the discipline of public health in which sampling and analysis of toxic substances have been conducted; in other words, where no diversion of the kind described above took place. Regarding the anthropological approach to occult entities, the situation appears to be different in principle. The reason seems obvious. While the existence of toxic substances conforms to the ontology from which both disciplines grow, spirits, demons or souls have no place in it. That, seemingly paradoxically, makes such entities very dangerous for our discipline. There is an implicit yet strict imperative to transform occult entities into something that does conform to our ontology. This imperative to transform seems generative of the anthropological discourse in a way that it is not of theology, occultist literature or fiction. Put differently, spirits, demons and souls can only feature in ethnography if presented as absent from the described world (Cannell 2006: 3). This is understandable, as historically, 'social science takes some of its earliest and most important steps toward a separate disciplinary identity by means of a unilateral declaration of independence from metaphysics' (ibid.: 14). Hence, over the course of its history, anthropology as a discipline has developed dozens of ways not to take what informants say about the occult realm at face value but rather as indicative of other issues.

To be sure, anthropologists are often critical of the hegemony of science-based ontology, claiming some kind of agnostic neutrality for themselves when it comes to the question of 'what is'. Clifford Geertz suggested in his seminal essay that 'one of the main methodological problems in writing about religion scientifically is to put aside at once the tone of the village atheist and that of village preacher, as well as their more sophisticated equivalents, so that the social and psychological implications of particular religious beliefs can emerge in a clear neutral light' (Geertz 1973b: 123). Tanya Luhrmann (2012: xxiv), to quote a more recent authoritative voice from anthropology, says that she 'will not judge whether God is or is not present to the people I came to know'. Instead, she avers that 'if God speaks, God's voice is heard through human minds constrained by their biology and shaped by their social community, and I believe that as a psychologically trained anthropologist, I can say something about those constraints and their social shaping'. So why do I think that we as anthropologists should strive to address the ontology of demons, gods, spirits and souls instead of limiting our investigations to the way people represent them? After all, are not people – their sociality and the representations via which they grasp and inhabit the world – the ultimate subject of anthropology? What is wrong with leaving occult entities to theologians and occultists and rocket detritus to environmentalists, engineers and chemists?

The sources of my discontent with such a proposition are manifold. I subscribe to a perhaps old-fashioned understanding of anthropology as a human-focused discipline. I nevertheless believe, with Eduardo Kohn (2013), that to understand humans and their specificities better we need to go 'beyond human' to explore various continuities and discontinuities between humans and other life forms and even forms that are, in our understanding, not alive or even non-existent. If we are to follow this logic, is it not the case that we need to understand gods in order to understand humans? Moreover, the professed intention not to comment on the ontological status of gods, spirits or souls is more often than not honoured in the breach. Even when we claim that we are not judging 'what is', the very way in which we tend to focus our disciplinary sensibilities, as Douglas has pointed out and as I have tried to demonstrate above with my discussion of the genealogy of my

own fieldwork encounters, proves that it is otherwise. The way we choose what to study is too often thoroughly and unreflexively influenced by our own ontological stance. More important, however, is that the 'agnostic' levelling we attempt by limiting our attention to representations only, even if truly symmetrically applied, is still problematic because the theory of representation it implicitly stands on is inherently asymmetrical. It divides the world into two ontologically distinct domains: that of reality proper and that of reality qualified by an adjective such as 'social', 'cultural' or some other modifier that renders it ontologically secondary, derivative and created by the processes of human representation. The relationship between the two supposed domains is understood as predominantly unidirectional and constantly under suspicion of arbitrariness. Truth in this view is a function of cross-checking the correspondence between the two domains, which gives rise to a special class of entities in the domain of the 'adjectivized' reality – signs that stand for themselves in the sense that they do not represent anything in the domain of reality proper. The status of such signs then runs the gamut from 'reasonable' entities indispensable for some function they perform (for example, numbers or conjunctives) to 'legitimate' expressions of fantasy and creativity to lies and 'phantasmagorical' claims falsely pretending to have a real referent 'out there'. Alternatively, they escape the question of reference altogether because, 'like all "symbolic expressions", "apparently irrational" beliefs are not so much false as empty, in the sense that they do not correspond to determinable propositions that can be judged for truth or falsehood' (Holbraad 2012b: 83; summarizing Sperber 1985).

The theoretical foundations on which this book builds are in this respect different. I do not wish to reproduce the divide between the world and its representations, as I believe that representations are just as much part of the world as the things they stand for. To borrow Andrew Pickering's (2017) terminology, I can say that my aim is to craft this book in a performative rather than a representational idiom. That, however, is not to postulate a world without differences. Quite the contrary – instead of sorting everything and anything into the two ontological domains of reality proper and 'adjectivized' secondary reality, I aim to understand existence as a much more nuanced problem. Instead of a simple

yes–no question, it becomes a question of degree and dynamics. Obviously, I am not the first person to think of the 'ontological status of the entities [. . . as] an accomplishment' or to want to treat such status not as given but rather as 'in a state of continual flux' (Woolgar and Lezaun 2013: 334). Throughout the book, I explicitly and implicitly draw on 'anti-representationist' literature in anthropology and other disciplines. Following scholars who have bestirred the so-called 'ontological turns' in anthropology, science studies and philosophy (Jensen et al. 2017), I too 'desire to think (and do) anthropology beyond [the dominant understanding of] representation' (Holbraad 2012a: xvi). The route I choose to follow in my efforts is that of 'methodological symmetry' as it has been proposed and critically explored across science studies, sociology and archaeology (Bloor 1991 [1976]; Konopásek and Paleček 2011; Latour 1993; Law 1994; Olsen 2012; Pels 1996).

With this book, I aim to make an empirically solid, critical contribution to a methodology that is, as Amiria Salmond aptly puts it, 'genuinely open to the existence of other forms of otherness; one that precisely refuses to place a bet either way when it comes to the question *what is?*' (2014: 170, emphasis in original). The way I pursue this goal is typically anthropological. This book is primarily an ethnography of Ulagan Raion in the Altai Republic (a project that has value in and of its own right) that exploits a strategically chosen comparison. It explores the predicament of human life in a place that is at the same time at the edge of one of Baikonur's rocket debris fallout zones and the home of Pazyryk, a world-famous archaeological site. What are the local consequences of these factors – both individually and in concert – for the region's human inhabitants? According to my informants, these consequences are illness, misfortune, violence and, ultimately, death. While my informants' concerns regarding rocket debris are, for the most part, in line with my own, that is not the case with regard to their archaeology-related concerns. Engaging consciously and simultaneously those claims of my informants that comply with my own convictions and those that do not (see the above quote from Mary Douglas), I hope to build in a methodological safety catch that will prevent me from unconsciously shaping the research by my own preconceptions of 'what is', or at least make them explicit. I want to avoid the unreflexive, re-

ductive transformation of the entities at stake that would tame their disruptive features into conformity with my own ontological grounding.

To put it more baldly, the main challenge of this book is to think anthropologically about spirits and souls without reducing the endeavour of ethnography to a representation of representations, a speech on speech, and a discourse on discourse, to paraphrase Mikhail Bakhtin (following Vrhel 1991). The main argument of this book is that we as anthropologists can better learn how to think and write about spirits, demons or souls in the ontological sense, without becoming theologians or esoterics, if we model our efforts on how we think and write about (and now I am drawing on the specific context I explore) toxic substances without becoming toxicologists or chemists. In other words, the latter can be used as a lens through which to observe the former, leading to a symmetrizing perspective that is nevertheless not mechanistically symmetrical or impartial. Throughout the book I, as an ethnographer, therefore dedicate comparatively more effort to figuring out how to engage with souls and spirits than with toxic substances. After all, the starting point of my analysis is intrinsically asymmetrical, mirroring the alleged ontological disparity in question.

From this symmetrizing perspective, I describe in a nuanced way the locally perceived mechanisms of harm with regard to archaeology and the space industry, and how the validity of these mechanisms is established, challenged and renegotiated. When the context changes, my informants' concerns about archaeology-related evil spirits are ridiculed and mocked; the only way to circumvent such aggressive dismissal is to transform the concerns into claims about cultural rights or heritage. Yet recasting in those terms fails to deliver the effects hoped for by my informants. In contrast, claims about rocket-debris-related toxic pollution are taken seriously even when transplanted across contexts because they appear to be reasonable, at least *in posse*. Here, however, comes an interesting twist that this book seeks to understand: while local people's 'superstitious' attitudes towards digging graves have been 'successful' in that they practically halted archaeological excavations in Altai more than ten years ago, the presumably more 'reasonable' issue of toxicity continues to be called into question, doubted and mired in questions of secrecy,

sampling and probability while rocket debris with leftover fuel continues to fall in Altai.

Setting the Scene: Altai and Its People

Many issues addressed in this book could be studied anywhere. Ulagan Raion in the Altai Republic hence could be seen, to use Matei Candea's (2007) words, as an 'arbitrary location'. However, I do not want to present it as a mere 'framework for a study of something else' (ibid.: 179). Arbitrary though it may be, Altai in this book is *not* a random *topoi* for an analysis aiming primarily at theoretical targets within anthropology itself. Rather, along with my theoretical and methodological agendas, I want to present ethnography as locally embedded expertise that is well-versed in the particular geography, history and linguistics of the place in question. In fact, I do not feel like I have a choice in this matter. Over the years of my field engagement, I have become far too closely related to – maybe obsessed and even possessed by – what I should, for lack of a suitable general term, refer to as *Altai*. It is a direct result of my fieldwork encounters that I hear the word 'Altai' everywhere. It figures in people's everyday speech, in the names of companies, banks, songs, music groups, newspapers, in official speeches, titles of books, words of religious praise and poems.

But what is Altai? There are several meanings of the word. First, there is the Altai mountain range, which starts at the present-day border of Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan and China and arcs in a south-easterly direction for almost two thousand kilometres. The northern part of the range, which towers over Russian territory, is often called Gornyi Altai (Mountainous Altai). A smaller part of the range, which lies to the west in the territory of Kazakhstan, is called Rudnyi Altai (Mineral Altai). South of Gornyi Altai there is the so-called Mongolian Altai, followed by the Gobi Altai (see Figure 0.2). Geographers and geologists also sometimes speak in terms of the Altai-Sayan or Sayan-Altai region, in which case they are stressing the closeness and geological connection between the Altai range and the Sayan range, the latter of which lies east of Gornyi Altai in the territory of Krasnoyarskii Krai and the republics of Tyva and Buryatia in the Russian Federation.

Second, the term Altai (and its variations, depending on pronunciation and transcription) refers to political-administrative units and towns. Within the present-day Russian Federation, the term Altai refers to the Altai Republic (the Gornyi Altai in geographical terms) and Altai Krai (in geographical terms sometimes referred to as 'steppe Altai'), which is a separate but contiguous administrative unit within the Russian Federation located in the fertile steppes north of the Altai Republic. In Mongolia there is the Govi-Altai Province (*Aimag*), whose capital is likewise called Altai. In The Xinjiang Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China, there is Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture, part of which is Altay Prefecture with the city of Altay as its capital.

Third, we hear of historical Altai, a vast territory that includes substantial parts of Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Xinjiang province of China, the Altai Krai and the republics of Altai, Tyva and Khakassia, to name just those territories on which there is general agreement. This 'greater Altai' is perceived by Altaians, as well as by many others across the world, as the homeland of all Turkic peoples. It is also the historical Altai that many authors associate with Herodotus' land of 'gold-guarding griffins' (Herodotus 1859: 23), even though others opine differently (see, for example, Asheri, Lloyd and Corcella 2007: 596; Larcher 1844: 16). 'Altai' is nevertheless often translated as 'Golden Mountains', and its etymology is commonly attributed to the Altaian word *altyn* or to its other Turkic or Mongolian equivalents, all meaning 'gold' or 'golden'[3] (for a more thorough historical discussion, see Kudachinova 2019: 138–41; 2020). This 'powerful myth of the "golden mountains", an image generated and shaped by resource concerns', is a product of complex 'histories of imperial expansion, knowledge production, and imagination' that placed 'Altai' firmly on 'Russian mental maps', to use Chechesh Kudachinova's words (2020: 29, 43).

Fourth, moving at last beyond meanings co-shaped by the (post-)imperial geographies of governance and extractivism, Altai is the name of a 'spiritual entity', a non-human subjectivity or, if you will, a personified *genius loci* (see, for example, Halemba 2006; Chapter 4 of this book).

Finally, the word Altai is used in the contemporary Altaian language (the name of which is yet another derivative of the word Altai) as a synonym for 'homeland' in the general sense of country

or, more specifically, of a particular place, be it a region or a village (see also Halemba 2006: 64). Thus the Altaian expression *Sen kazhy Altainaŋ?* – literally, 'From which Altai are you?' – should be translated as 'Where are you from?'

When I use the word Altai in this book, directly or as an unspecified term in quotations from my informants, I mean the territory of the Altai Republic, which coincides with the geographical notion of Gornyi Altai. Nevertheless, all of these other meanings, such as Altai as a spiritual entity or historical Altai, are never too far away. Sometimes people in the Altai Republic reject others' claims of being part of Altai. For instance, I overheard people in Altai excoriate musicians from the neighbouring Republic of Tyva who used the word Altai in the title of their CD. On other occasions the surrounding territories and peoples are treated as extensions of Altai to stress the region's historical greatness and territorial expanse. The notion of Altai is thus quite elastic and contextually flexible (see also Donahoe et al. 2008: 1000). Therefore, unless a more specific definition of the word Altai is needed, I shall allow it to retain a certain degree of fuzziness throughout the book as well.

A certain fuzziness extends also to the people who are at the centre of this book's interest. With a territory of more than 90,000 km^2, the Altai Republic hosts a permanent population of approximately 210,000, almost half of whom live in and around the capital, Gorno-Altaisk. The population density decreases in the mountainous heartland of the republic. More than half of the total population is ethnic Russian, whereas the native Turkic-speaking Altaians form one-third of the population. In the central regions and regions bordering Mongolia, Kazakhstan and China, Altaians nevertheless form the majority (with a sizeable Kazakh minority in some areas). That is and at the same time is not the case in Ulagan Raion. More than 90 per cent of the raion's population is no doubt native and Turkic-speaking. Yet, while they perceive themselves as Altaians, they simultaneously and sometimes also exclusively refer to themselves as Telengits (see Broz 2009b; Donahoe et al. 2008: 1000–3).

National, ethnic and linguistic identity, however, while being an indispensable aspect of the ethnographic backdrop to this study, is not at the heart of my investigations. Rather, the identity politics I aim to describe is much more general. It comprises not

only identities and identifications but also alterities and otherings that concern a variety of entities, human and non-human, natural and supernatural, those that some of the human protagonists in this book see as existing and those whose existence is denied by many. In this sense, the resulting approach to identity politics has an ontological spin. My ambition in this book is to identify, however imperfectly, continuities and discontinuities in and of several onto-political processes within but also beyond Altai and its people, including processes that go right to the heart of the discipline of anthropology – that is, ethnographic writing.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter 1 introduces Ulagan as a place and its human and non-human inhabitants as the main characters of the book. The contours of Ulagan eclectically combine histories of various kinds with my experiences over years of ethnographic encounters. The chapter addresses the 'peripherality' of Ulagan and how it translated into both the creation of the Altai State Nature Reserve and the establishment of the rocket fallout zone on its territory. After framing the negative effects of the rocket remnants in terms of 'negative externalities', I argue that many of Ulagan's inhabitants also use a similar logic to understand archaeological excavations conducted in the region.

Chapter 2 starts with a seemingly innocent lesson in letter reading. Yet, since the letter was written by a local politician who makes demands based on the assumption of occult interference in the 2003 earthquake in Altai, it soon becomes clear that the question posed interrogates the way anthropologists treat their informants' claims when they do not fit Western ontological premises. I argue that when facing claims about the supernatural, anthropologists typically follow one of the two routes well established in the discipline. They either analytically substitute the occult entities in question, or they declare that their (non-)existence is beyond the limits of anthropological enquiry. Dissatisfied with both of these approaches, the chapter then turns to the current anthropological attention to ontology and links it to the concept of

'negative externality', with the aim of creating an analytical space for ontologically unbiased dialogue.

Chapter 3 explores a key local concept – that of 'soul' (and, later in the chapter, the notion of 'soul-double') – as it emerges from a 'battle for Altaian souls' – a more or less reflexive exchange between generations of missionaries, local thinkers and translocal scholars dwelling at the interface of languages – Russian on the one hand, and the language cluster that eventually became modern-day Altaian on the other. The chapter further demonstrates that the concept of soul is crucial for understanding the local aetiology of death and that a particular and often feared cause of death is theft of one's soul. The chapter then describes what kinds of entities typically prey on soul-double with such grim consequences.

Chapter 4 revolves around another Altaian concept whose local significance is hard to overestimate, that of *eezi* – the spirit-master of a place. To foreground the particular understanding of human and non-human personhood and the notion of ownership that the concept of *eezi* grows from and feeds into, I further bring animals into the discussion. Dwelling on debates about Amerindian perspectivism, I argue that the difference between hunting and herding is a matter of perspective, as wild animals could be seen by Ulagan's herders and hunters as the cattle of local spirit-masters. With the example of hunting at hand, the chapter returns to the problem of the local aetiology of death and, with a stopover on the topic of sacrifice, it sheds further light on the omnipresent risk of soul-double loss inherent to the predicament of living in – and off – land that is animated by numerous non-human agencies.

Both Chapters 3 and 4 could be read as classic ethnographic accounts of significant local concepts. Given their extent and attention to detail, the two chapters might appear to be a detour from the more theoretical aims of the book, yet they are necessary to lay the groundwork for my attempt in the ensuing chapters to level the playing field for the comparison of phenomena that comply with the reader's ontological expectations with those that are at odds with those expectations. Put differently, my effort to revisit the anthropological take on the reality of entities such as souls and spirits relies on the detailed ethnographic portrayal of how these entities feature in people's lives.

Drawing together the several lines of enquiry pursued thus far, Chapter 5 knits local forms of funeral conduct and the arrangement of graves with the previously discussed aetiology of death and links the two to the local perception of archaeological work as a grave-digging enterprise that releases evils spirits. Calling upon the concept of negative externality as established earlier in the book, the chapter then pursues what I call the 'comparison impossible' – my effort to compare evil spirits and the chemical substances allegedly emitted by rocket debris falls on an ontologically level playing field. Symmetrizing the starting point of analytical attention to the best of my ability, I follow the processes through which chemical substances and evil spirits get established and contested as real entities in various arenas in Altai and beyond. Drawing on the notion of 'ontological choreography', I propose to see the existence of both as a performative process rather than as a zero-sum game, which leads to an unavoidable question: can and should anthropology ever view and analyse evil spirits as genuine causes, rather than as the effects of something else?

Taking the reader to the village of Ulagan for the last time, Chapter 6 focuses on 'othering' as one aspect of the spirit workings. Building on the observations made in previous chapters, it then traces how such workings of spirits might unfold across contexts and right into the heart of anthropology: the ethnographic writing itself. Entering the uncomfortable zone where the very foundations of the discipline are called into question, I call for 'strict ontological continuity' as a logic complementary to the radical alterity typically taken as a premise by ontologically attuned anthropology.

Returning full circle to the tone of the Introduction, the Conclusion recounts an event from my ethnographic encounters that occurred eleven years after the opening vignette of this book. Observing how the fear of evil spirits awakened by archaeological excavations and of *geptil* emitted by rocket debris translated into my own parental worries, I argue for the recognition of the empowering potential of ontological continuities regardless of their genealogy.

Notes

1. *Raion* is a Russian word cognate with the English word 'region'. It refers to an administrative unit roughly analogous to 'county'.
2. See, for example, '"Mummy's Curse" Upsets Siberians' (2004).
3. For example, the Mongolian word *alt* and the Tyvan word *aldyn*. I have also come across other etymologies. According to one of my informants, Altai comes from *alty tai* – 'six (maternal) uncles' – which he associated with six sacred mountains on the territory of the Altai Republic (see also Kudachinova 2020: 35).