Towards A Critical Natural History

Hugh Raffles
Department of Anthropology, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA, USA; raffles@ucsc.edu

My sincere thanks to all the contributors and to Bruce Braun and Neil Brenner for making this symposium possible. It is a rare honor to have such serious attention directed to one’s work. These commentaries offer a model of engaged scholarship that reaches beyond the present forum—a call to keep working and writing, to keep transgressing disciplinary borders, to keep imagining different futures.

As Candace Slater suggests, there are other Amazons in Igarapé Guariba. Most often subdued, the narratives she describes surface when dolphins circle outside houses and children come flying out of the water, when the same dolphins follow the river boats, skimming and diving, when unexplained lights shine in the dense blackness of the forest, when a ghost-ship appears on the horizon, when a stream erupts in a sudden whirlpool, when luck dies, when fish and game flee, and when the rising river changes its form so thoroughly and so rapidly that experienced hunters lose their way, stranded in a landscape they no longer know.

Yet in comparison with the region that comes to life in her wonderful Dance of the Dolphin, my Amazonia is an altogether less enchanted place—or, at least, a place less enchanted by the encantado narratives she has collected (Slater 1994). Like many other places, this Amazonia is somewhere in which fantasy holds to multiple idioms, a place where narrative is deeply but contingently made and remade through a broad range of situated practices that include many forms of meaning-making. It is a place in which place-making is accomplished as much through the materialities of political economy—the translocal politics of the timber industry, for example—as it is through the articulation of memory, imagination, and affect.

Amazonia is far from alone in being a place of biophysical and phenomenological fluidities. Yet working there forced me to recognize, in ways I had not previously, the artificiality of the conventional disciplinary distinctions between history, anthropology, and geography, and the inadequacy of the spatial, temporal, and ecological taxonomies I had inherited. In fact, the sheer excess of materiality and discursivity I encountered in both nature and “nature” pushed me to work against
recreating these normative purifications. My ethnographic engagement with the region drew me into its “naturecultures” (to use Donna Haraway’s language), and it is this experience of interpellation that is embodied in the book’s recuperation and reinvention of the practices of natural history.

In *Amazonia* is an attempt to write this naturalcultural world without reproducing its purification into dichotomous categories—nature/culture, local/global, material/discursive, rationality/affect. Though the sites I explore are patently arbitrary and by no means exclusive, my claim in the book is quite general. I work historically with ethnography and ethnographically with history to offer a particular genealogy of the co-constitution of place-making, nature-making, and region-making in Amazonia. Productive ways of reordering relationships between humans and nonhumans are located in the early modern classificatory instabilities that we find in Walter Ralegh, in the fraught dialogics of Victorian exploration-science, in the natural historical affect that underwrites the modern natural sciences (despite their objectivist claims), and in the embodied engagement in the natural world that characterizes so much of life in the contemporary Amazon. These are reorderings that displace many of the representational hierarchies that, as Nigel Clark might put it, underwrite the “western metaphysical tradition”. In taking seriously both the “natural” and the “historical”, this critical natural history allows me to write the multiple and often disjunctive spatialities and temporalities of these varied but productive practices. I am grateful for Michael Bravo’s development of this line of thought. I like to think of this work as a natural history of the present, a natural history in which natures in the plural are necessarily constitutive of all our histories, just as those histories are so deeply sedimented in nature.¹

In *Amazonia* is also a redemptive text, motivated in part by the desire to restore agency to Amazonian *caboclos*, the “peasants” of the region, maligned in much popular and academic discourse as the hapless victims of a too powerful tropical environment. But rather than arguing, as others have, for the capacity of *caboclos* to dominate Amazonian nature, my goal is to demonstrate how the region itself has emerged through the complicated and mobile entanglement of a vast array of human and nonhuman actors across time and space; how, in this sense, the region is an assemblage of human and non-human, nature and culture, local and global, and so on.

Nigel is absolutely right to point out that this is not simply an argument about the socialization of nature. Instead, we might recast the question as how a non-foundationalist analytic—one that refuses the categorical priority or independence of any set of relations, be it place, race, gender, class, economy, labor, nature, whatever—can insist on the effective materiality of biophysical nature. Speaking
generally, this insistence is necessary only because of the current tendency to disarticulate discursive formations from grounded practice, to imagine “society [as] a battlefield of representations”, as T J Clark famously put it (1984:6).

But how do we retain a sense of the nonhuman in its multiplicity, energy, difference, and self-possession while refusing the overbearing and carcereal Amazonian “nature” through which caboclos and others have been marginalized? How do we represent this Amazonian nature in terms, as Nigel so elegantly puts it, of conversations rather than conversions, terms that effectively render its conjoined materiality and discursivity, and, for want of a better word, its agency? I try to make clear from the very start of the book that readers should be in no doubt as to the effective materiality of Amazonian rivers, streams, and other nonhuman actors. But, as I have already suggested, I am also writing against an ecological tradition in anthropology that understands human–natural relations as based on the intersection of two distinct domains. In this literature, what are understood as contradictions between nature and culture are resolved through a set of naturalizing concepts such as “adaptation” and “carrying capacity”. This is a literature that should make us cautious about the terms in which we emphasize the agency of the nonhuman. My strategic maneuvering between the Scylla and Charybdis of putatively competing but fundamentally consonant determinisms may help explain why Doreen Massey senses a muting of the biophysical in the book. But I suspect that to really get at this issue we should look more closely at the types of agency that are at work here.

What kind of agency can recognize the prior constitution of its agents as natural-cultural entities? Certainly it would be in contrast to a more familiar variant in which agency stands opposed to structure and in which agents are conceived as sovereign human subjects. Indeed, I’m concerned that a language of agency locks us into the very logical opposition we should escape, an analytics in which the agency of nature is restricted by the imposition of human technologies and the agency of people is constrained by the structure of natural limits. These, it seems to me, are the very agencies that underwrite the humanist notion of place that Doreen has done so much to decenter (see, particularly, Massey 1994).

So here is a paradox: the necessity of insisting on the natural-cultural concurrently with the extra-discursive materiality that is the “really real” of both nature in its biophysicality and of human experience. This is an analytic tension I’m happy to leave unresolved, an aporia that I view as a problem of representation rather than of social theory (to the extent that these can be disarticulated). The Amazonia of In Amazonia is one in which the materiality of nature—the astonishing power and unfathomable instability of the region’s rivers, for
example—is a natural as well as social fact. The challenge is to render this effectively while acknowledging that the book itself participates in the making of Amazonia as readily and as complicitly as the historical and contemporary accounts on which it relies. Of course, the Amazons with which I am most concerned, the Amazon of Euro-American imagination and the Amazon of Igarapé Guariba, are only two deeply sedimented versions of many profoundly intertwined Amazons. Always embedded here is the question of power: how do these Amazons circulate? How is it that some matter more than others? It is in this highly situated context that my conversation with Paul about epistemology should be understood. It is not a refusal to concede the reality of nature—that is itself one of the bases for our friendship; my wariness is with the unmediated reality of the ecologists’ nature and its universalizing claims.

Let me finish by revisiting the question of place, only this time through the politics of ethnography. It is worth emphasizing that ethnography is a situated practice, situated among and within, co-producing and co-produced by, a complex of other situated practices. And, as I have just suggested, ethnography is always already complicit in the narratives that it produces. There is no ethnographic (or representational) outside from which to escape, for example, the overlapping allures of Romantic visions of tropical nature and the instrumental realism of forest ecology. Ethnography is a methodology in which the instabilities, pleasures, pains, and particularities of the analytical project—though often absent in the works that anthropologists publish—are unavoidably foregrounded in practice. And, as the book tries to make clear, this experience of agonistic (and convivial) encounter among humans and nonhumans which is common to ethnographers, explorers, traveling scientists, to those caught up in their projects, and to many others, is an especially rich site of knowledge production, a site that makes possible and evident trajectories that would otherwise be unavailable.

We should be clear that an ethnographic attention to micro-practices by no means implies a privileging of a “local” imagined as a spatially or culturally restricted object of analysis. (And nor, of course, does it imply any particular normative imaginary of “local people” or “local places”.) On the contrary, the places described in the book are spatially and temporally discontinuous, always in process, always in motion, always connected, and always in-the-making through historical sedimentation, natural-cultural practice, and the effectivities of the really real. Again, I am gesturing toward the complex overdetermination of a power-saturated material-discursive domain that encompasses the apparently intimate as readily as it does the so-called “global”. In this sense, an attention to micro-practices collapses scale such that the politics of the “global” are evident in the
intimate (and the strategy holds in reverse—the intimate being evident in the global). The quotidian in these terms is a condensation of what might be conventionally considered “bigger” or “longer”—it is a temporal as well as spatial expression of Bruno Latour’s helpful, if unidirectional, insight that “the global is local at all points” (1993:117).

*In Amazonia* is an ethnographic natural history, the product of a method and an epistemology without guarantees, a messy and painful politics. This is not a legislative project. I offer it as just one approach to a set of problems of broad interest, and I’m pleased to see that it has succeeded in generating debate and analysis. But—and this is an inevitability I believe we should embrace—though it may contribute its own situated materialdiscursivity, this is an assemblage that can only approximate its task of describing a naturalcultural world animated by difference, power, and history, a world that will always exceed our languages and imaginings, a world without beginning, end, or outside.

**Endnote**

1 I owe this Foucauldian term “natural history of the present” to conversations with Donald Moore (see Moore forthcoming).

**References**


Massey D (1994) *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press
