



Negotiating Nonhuman/Human Place

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This is a book to celebrate, to linger over, to read more than once. It is a piece of real scholarship, crafted with care and thoughtfulness, and drawing on varying and considerable research. I argued with it at times. I argued for instance over its opposition between being “on the ground” and more distanced views, and the preference for the former (this is a sharp distinction, considering the insistence on slippage and ambiguity elsewhere). The romance of being in amongst things, as lending an ability to catch the full reality, *is* a romance; just as much as the distanced view sometimes indulges in a romance of objectivity. I jibbed too against the opposition between messiness and angularity (the latter interpreted as more “orderly” and definitely less attractive). But even more often there were provocations to new thoughts and appreciations. In the analysis of the 19th-century naturalist Henry Walter Bates, there is a moving, and angering, account of the class prejudices within academe which still resonates today. This is a rich book, and our brief in these reviews is to focus on particular elements of its complexity.

In Amazonia understands places as moments: “spatial moments [that] come into being and continue being made at the meeting points of history, representation, and material practice” (7–8). It is an understanding which engages with work I have done myself on trying to conceptualise place as ongoing negotiation. Hugh Raffles’ work is excellent in bringing into this negotiation both the material and the discursive (and the intricate and incessant relations between the two, their constant co-formings) and the human and the nonhuman (the latter going here by the term “nature”). It is a wonderfully rich exploration, each chapter adding a different angle of understanding to the complexity. The chapters on the twentieth-century Amazon, explored through Raffles’ own visits, give a strong sense of what this “negotiation” means in the present and in the recent past; while some of the elements of the inherited imaginations through which this negotiation is, on the human side, conducted are explored in the chapters on Raleigh and on Bates. (Though my characterisation here is far too clear—the book works throughout with the instabilities and

difficulties of such apparently sharp demarcations.) The inherited imaginations of this region themselves crucially involve both conceptions of the human and nonhuman and the character of the boundaries and relations between the two. Throughout, there is an impressive and engaging multifacetedness in this exploration of place as moment/product/negotiation.

At times, in the context of certain stories, the emphasis is on “nature” as active agent, and there are some wonderful passages which give a sense of this:

they may look secure, but landscapes are always in motion, always in process. In Igarapé Guariba, the energy of the non-human is so excessive that it forces recognition. The river will not allow you to ignore it. The land shifts of its own accord. The banks crumble, the fields flood, the orchards float off to the horizon. (34–35)

At other points, the force of the argument is in the opposite direction. The arching story which frames the book is of the *human* construction of waterways in Igarapé Guariba. Keeping all these things in play, and both directions of this argument as it were, is one of the many strengths, and delights, of the work.

If anything, however, the greater dynamic of the argument falls on the human side. The passage I quoted earlier, indeed, is set within a wider caution against Malthusian notions of natural limits and their legacy in the “narrow preoccupation with the constraints of given biophysical conditions” (36), and the consequent need for genealogy, for going beyond any simple reading of “nature out there”. This is a reasonable caution, and it raises the thorny issue of how the voice of (the practice of) the nonhuman can be given weight. The dominant claims on the back cover of the book concern human agency: that the book demonstrates—“in contrast to the tendency to downplay human agency in the Amazon—that the region is an outcome of the intimately intertwined histories of humans and nonhumans”.

At times, the dominance of this side of the argument—against environmental determinism and for human agency—caught me by surprise. Perhaps the impetus to contest determinism results in a wider downplaying of agency. I had thought that the stronger current at the moment, in our theorising, was the search for an escape from an overwhelming social/discursive constructionism. However, there are *reasons* for Raffles’ emphasis in this Amazonian context. Our discursive constructions (precisely) of Amazonia in the West historically have been as nature untamed, and it is this reading which Raffles tackles centrally. But from here other complexities unfurl. It is still the case that the material anthropogenic waterways of Igarapé Guariba are tiny in relation to the Amazon Basin (though they are only iconic exemplars of a wider phenomenon). And yet again, there

is the more recent imaginary of this region as fragile and vulnerable in the face of human invasion and general human onslaught. And yet again, the very fact that the effects of such an onslaught, and the destruction of swathes of the (current form of the) Amazon basin, stand to have such massive global effects is witness to the power of the *nonhuman* as active agent. Through these shifting sands, Hugh Raffles weaves the complexity of his own analysis.

And as I read on, following the flow of argument this way and that, this conjuring of place set off streams of thought of my own, not of things this book should necessarily have done but of trails of analysis we might go on to follow or push further.

First of all there is the fact that this element of the negotiation of place which is between human and nonhuman both varies dramatically between places (and over times) and is as “political” and as contestable as is that which is, apparently, between humans alone. Raffles’ story of Igarapé Guariba, and the different balances and manners of negotiation in contest there, is a case in point. As I immersed myself in *In Amazonia* I kept thinking back to Mike Davis’ work on Los Angeles and in particular to his *Ecologies of Fear*. How different the assumed balance of forces between human and nonhuman; how different the (European) foundational human imaginary, of modern “man’s” assumptions of the possibility of control over nature; how different the argument which has to be made to retrieve the uncertainty and the real twowayness of a negotiation in which the human and nonhuman are equally active. It might be good seriously to pursue comparisons between such modes of the human/nonhuman negotiation of place, and to compare, and relate, the kinds of politics which emerge and which are called for. Chapter 7, “Fluvial intimacies” opens up some lines of thought for such an exploration. Such studies do already exist but they are perhaps too often comparisons of a monolithic modern West with “indigenous” societies typically romanticised as living in harmony with “nature”. Perhaps we could ponder a little more upon the current range of negotiations, even within the West. Moreover, such human/nonhuman negotiations of place, just as the human, although involving a politics of place, are not confined to those places—the global nonhuman connectivities of both Amazonian and Angelino versions are incontestable.

A second line of further thought which *In Amazonia* engaged for me again concerned the human/nonhuman. This is “a natural history”, as the subtitle says. Might there not be a case for making nature/the nonhuman *more* active an agent? And specifically an agent in its own right and on a bigger, longer perspective than the intricate quotidian, seasonal human-related changes related here. Maybe this is a result of the focus on being in-amongst-it. There is still a sense, perhaps in consequence inevitable, that the Amazon is *there* and humans

interpret it, produce understandings through which it is engaged. This is not perhaps a project which *In Amazonia* could have taken on (though I note the dating for the chapters—“plateaus” fashion—11,000 BP to 2002!) but doing so might have further unsettled some of the parameters of the analysis. For one thing it might involve a much longer term perspective, of major geomorphological “events” (the formation of the basin itself), of geology, even of tectonics (the floating-off of the very continent of South America). The really *longue durée*.

This is in part an in-principle point: that such a perspective enables escape from any notion of nature (in the sense of landscape, land) as stable foundation. It is also a point which derives from my own interest in the project of trying to think across human geography and physical geography (Hugh Raffles engages with an aspect of this, in relation to the more general divide between the human and the natural sciences, at the end of Chapter 6). It is a project with a degree of political urgency as well as conceptual appropriateness. This conceptual–political connection is reinforced, moreover, by the fact that such a perspective might help bring into view the vastly contrasting temporalities in play within the nonhuman world, and within the human/nonhuman negotiation. Such a recognition both further emphasises the lack of a stable foundation and is a necessary input to the political. Places are moments of negotiation, certainly, between material, discursive, human and nonhuman; they are also points of intersection between contrasting temporalities and spatialities. *In Amazonia* clearly recognises the differing spatialities. The contrasting temporalities pose real problems for politics: of the non-coherence of place, of the impossible trade-offs between long-term goals and immediate necessities, of the difficulties of democratic accountability to a barely imaginable posterity.

But this raises a further question. The formulation I deployed above invoked “nature” as agent *in its own right*. Does place *become* place only with human engagement? Such an understanding can be problematical if only (though not only) because of the dangerous political waters into which it can lead, both through a romanticisation of place which can bring in its train both exclusivities and resistance to change, and through the distinction it can engender between space (abstract, meaningless) and place (meaningful) which can all too easily play to a political localism or local centredness. But such problems do not necessarily follow; so the question still stands: is place only place *for* humans? I wrestled with this question as I read *In Amazonia* and remain unsure of the book’s position. Is “locality”, perhaps, meant as something different from place? Sometimes the two words are used as synonyms; sometimes they are opposed. Then there is the debate with natural-science colleague Paul, in Chapter 6,

where Hugh “remain[s] sceptical about the hunt for natural processes” (172) (and agrees on a compromise critical realist approach), and his rejection of “a stripped-down, geographically situated space in which the social is excised from the world of nature” (174). Hugh’s critical realist approach concedes “a limited, strategic version of his [Paul’s] claim for those things—relatively autonomous in their biophysicality—that he calls nature” (172). There are three aspects to my response to this. First there is the material and discursive fact that this portion of the earth’s surface has been heavily affected by human involvement—and this is incontrovertibly established. Second, though, the process is not understood also to go the other way. The wariness of an autonomous “nature” is not paralleled by a recognition of any impregnation of the social by the natural. This leads directly to my third observation: that there seems to be a reticence about natural processes at all, since they always come to us already discursively constructed. There is an anxiety, then, about approaching the physical world. Yet in Chapters 4 and 5, on Raleigh and Bates, there is no problem in addressing directly, as unproblematic objects of analysis, a whole variety of writings and other texts. This is, of course, a general issue in the prison house of language: that its prisoners, while they cannot approach the “natural” world, seem able directly to engage with discourse. It is a classic case, perhaps, of simple inversion being as bad as the old problem it was meant to address, where the world of nature could be known directly but the textual products of the human could only be approached with circumspection. Today it seems that, on some formulations, we can only approach “nature” through its discursive constructedness, but the discourses themselves are immediately available. Curious. This book does not quite fall into that, but it did set me wondering—in a constructive, productive way—what might be a history of place with an even stronger role for the nonhuman.