

Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 1

Issue 1 *Special Issue: Politics and Religion in Amazonia*

Article 7

June 2003

In Amazonia: A Natural History

Michael F. Brown

Williams College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Brown, Michael F. (2003). "In Amazonia: A Natural History," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol1/iss1/7>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

In Amazonia: A Natural History. Hugh Raffles. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. xiii + 302 pp., notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00 (cloth), \$17.95 (paper). ISBN0-691-04884-3, ISBN 0-691-04885-1. [www.pup.princeton.edu].

MICHAEL F. BROWN
Williams College

Hugh Raffles has produced that rare species of academic writing, the unclassifiable book. Part ethnography, part history, and part meditation on the relationships between people and nature in Brazil, *In Amazonia* offers moments of fresh insight that merit wide attention in anthropology and beyond.

The heart of the book lies in the author's multifaceted account of human engagement with the fluvial and forest environments of Brazil's northern state of Pará. Raffles documents how river-dwelling *caboclos* have reshaped the Amazonian floodplain through the construction of canals that link strands of the Amazon's convoluted river system. To make sense of these local canal projects, the number and scale of which seem to have passed unnoticed by all but a few geographers and historians, Raffles untangles the region's patterns of colonization, patronage, and politics. He does this through the histories of multigenerational families, whose surviving members talk about their alliances and feuds over the span of the twentieth century. Rural communities such as Igarapé Guariba, one of the places Raffles studies in detail, rise and fall in response to changes in global markets and the availability of local resources, but the early years of abundance linger on in the memories of everyone connected to the place, even long after they have moved to the region's cities in search of salaried work or more comfortable living conditions.

Raffles assays this nostalgia and its multiple links to place making and ideas of nature. His point is that thinking about Amazonia as a "natural" environment has blinded observers to the ways fluvial ecology has been reshaped by human agency. His interviews with long-time residents of Igarapé Guariba have transformed his view of the Amazon basin:

I have come to see labor in every Amazon stream. Now, when I look at the landscape, I imagine histories of creativity. When I travel along rivers, I picture the multiple agencies of human and non-human actors. When I hear talk of nature, the words have a specific resonance, a lived referentiality (p. 34).

A subsequent chapter, "The Dreamlife of Ecology," shifts the focus from rivers to trees. Raffles describes the collaboration of Brazil's federal

environmental agency, a logging company, and a regional environmentalist NGO to monitor the growth of native big-leaf mahogany in a protected area. The mahogany project is perfect material for Raffles' kaleidoscopic approach. We learn about mahogany's fabled history as the "monarch of woods," the complex political deals that had to be brokered before the Pará forest preserve could be set aside for research purposes, and the difficulties of studying a slow-growing tropical tree species about whose life cycle and requirements surprisingly little is known. The forest under study has anthropogenic elements that raise questions about where humankind ends and nature begins. The scientific study of the mahogany, Raffles says, is a form of practice that "remakes people and places, bringing them face to face in new and transforming ways" (p.178).

In Amazonia consists of two parts that almost, but not quite, form a unified whole. Parked between sections about Pará are two chapters recounting the misadventures of Walter Raleigh (1552?-1618) in the Guianas and the scientific collecting campaign of Henry Walter Bates (1825-1892) along the length of the Amazon. The relevance of the Raleigh saga remains elusive, aside from a few evocative passages in which the explorer limns the beauty of landscapes that attained park-like perfection under the management of the region's Indians. The chapter on Bates is far stronger. Raffles paints a picture of Bates's early life as an upwardly mobile striver trying to break through the class barriers of British science, his years as a collector (particularly of insects) in Brazil, and the role played by his popular travel account, *The Naturalist on the River Amazons*, in the shaping of European images of the region. Classification and related commerce in exotic life forms are revealed as an integral part of the European colonial project.

Raffles repeatedly invokes the concept of intimacy in his descriptions of interactions between Brazilians and Amazonian ecology. Intimacy implies physical proximity, of course, but it also connotes deep knowledge and emotional engagement, qualities that Raffles emphasizes throughout his account. Intimacy, he says, is "the mark of a lived relationship between humans and nature, an expression of biography—of the politics tied up in the lives of both people and landscapes . . . Such intimacies are sites where the politics of space are practiced: where places, regions, and localities get worked through, made, and grounded, literally" (p. 182).

The author's prose is erudite and allusive, and each chapter of *In Amazonia* offers memorable, finely worked portraits of individuals, places, and situations. Occasionally the burden of originality seems more than Raffles can bear, tempting him to default to the leaden abstractions of current academic fashion. He concludes a vivid meditation on the landscapes of Pará this way: "We know the obvious as a form of Gramscian common sense, discursive practice that reiteratively constitutes subjectivity" (p.153). In response to language that does so little useful work one is tempted to reply: Acts of occupational mimesis deployed to legitimate the academic imaginary only serve to occlude

intersubjective understanding. Or, something like that.

A more significant problem lies in Raffles's reluctance to define the outer limits of the claim that nature is a social construction. He explicitly identifies his analysis with the work of Anna Roosevelt, William Balée, William Denevan, and others who have demonstrated that Amazonian ecology has been more shaped by human intervention than was once recognized. In broader philosophical terms Raffles's analysis echoes and supports more theoretical approaches—the work of Raymond Williams and William Cronon comes first to mind—that question the arbitrary exclusion of human beings from environmentalist images of nature.

Yet, as the environmental policy expert Paul Wapner has pointed out recently (“Leftist Criticism of ‘Nature’: Environmental Protection in a Postmodern Age,” *Dissent*, Winter 2003, pp.71-75), this new vision of nature-as-social-construct is enthusiastically embraced by right-wing critics of environmentalism to support their view that nature need not be regarded as a pristine resource worthy of preservation. To observe, as Raffles does, that human engagement with a given landscape produces changes that still qualify as “natural” leads inexorably to the question of whether we should regard the Dantesque digging pits of Amazonian gold mining—burned on our visual memories by the photographs of Sebastião Salgado—as just another example of an anthropogenic nature. It is hard to imagine that Raffles would support this position, but by failing to address the full implications of his analysis he leaves awkward questions unresolved.

Perhaps this is asking too much of a book that celebrates indirection. Raffles's argument twists and doubles back on itself, much like the Amazonian rivers that are one of its main themes. And like those rivers, it gathers momentum as it moves along, turning stories from the region's history and social relations into a compelling vision of humanity's place in a complex and vulnerable ecosystem.

Archaeology in Latin America. Gustavo G. Politis and Benjamin Alberti, editors. London: Routledge, 1999. xiv + 286 pp., figures, tables, index. \$41.95 (paper). ISBN 0-415-22158-7. [www.routledge.com]

PETER W. STAHL

State University of New York, Binghamton

In this interesting collection, editors Gustavo Politis and Benjamin Alberti sample the many approaches that are used in contemporary Latin American archaeology. Contributing chapters are written by Latin Americans or by long-term foreign residents who have been incorporated into their local