

ESSAYS

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An Embodied Perspective on “Natural” Environment

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Walking Through Amazonia: An Embodied Perspective on “Natural” Environment

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Based on the ethnographic analysis of a Brazilian quilombo's¹ subsistence practices in Eastern Amazonia, the article shows how walking represents an embodied, non-logocentric tool for knowing, experiencing and producing a “socio-natural” environment. First, I will focus on walking as a “technique of the body” (Mauss 1935) that the anthropologist needs to re-apprehend according to a local habitus (Bourdieu 1977) in order to understand how the forest space is perceived. From this perspective, movement in space assumes a methodological value. Secondly, by interweaving the related concepts of space and place, I will reveal how two different complementary modalities of experiencing the territory emerged during my fieldwork. One of them was somewhat more ephemeral and subjective whilst the second one was longer lasting and shared. On the one hand, by moving in space in accordance with his/her original trajectories, each individual knew a particular forest, which s/he also ultimately altered through specific “territorializing acts”. On the other hand, the ephemeral signs impressed on vegetation by the individual intersected a shared mapping of “natural” places which remained relatively steady in time.

“Learning To Make The Body ‘Light’”

During my fieldwork, I saw small groups of people leaving the village of Frechal a little after sunrise. They came back home just at midday or later in the afternoon. I became used to hearing that they were going “into the *mato*” to carry out their agricultural activities. Villagers used the word *mato* to refer to a familiar forest type habitually frequented and utilized. In order to better understand its context of utilization, it is necessary to clarify a few other terms. *Mata* was “an area where it was never deforested,” characterized by high-trunk trees, and rarely penetrated. Instead, the term *roça* indicated either a physical place – a cultivated field obtained by deforestation and consequent burning of an area – and, more in general, the whole swidden practices of the community. Spaces dedicated to cultivation and those occupied by spontaneous flora were perceived as an inseparable reality so much so that to let others know you were going into the *roça*, they simply said: “I’m going into the *mato*.”

My first walks through the *mato*, following a group related to my host family, occurred during the wet season when the soil was impregnated with water and the vegetation really exuberant. My embarrassing unskillfulness in coping with the obstacles of the path elicited ill-concealed laughs that signaled the substantial lack of “corporeal” competence in carrying out an activity normally taken for granted (Turner 2000: 55). In order to conduct my fieldwork, I immediately realized that I had to render my own manner of walking efficacious when venturing into the *mato*.

No-one offered a precise explanation as to how I had to adapt; I only knew that I needed to “learn to make my body ‘light’ (*leve*).” I did with the passing of time learn that a successful outcome depended on a series of factors such as the rhythm and gait of my stride, the inclination of my body and the pressure applied by a specific part of my foot as I stepped. Csordas’s (1999) concept of *reflectivity* – that is complementary to the *reflexivity* of the constructionist approach – clearly expresses a progressive awareness related to this range of competences incorporated within a perceptual enskillment process. As suggested by Tuck-Po, “I had to learn a whole new vocabulary of the body,” learning to walk in a single file following the rhythm of the group, putting my feet in appropriate points, “keeping my arms close to avoid brushing against piercing thorns” and “falling lightly rather than hard” (2008: 28). Conducting an “ethnography on foot” (Ingold and Vergunst 2008) means paying attention to an “under scrutinized” dimension that is “the bodily experience of the fieldworker as research process and source of knowledge” (Okely 2007: 65–66).

During this apprenticeship, I was learning not only how to move in the forest space, but also to *see*

¹In Brazil, a *quilombo* is a rural community of descendants of African slaves who receives a formal recognition. Frechal obtained it after a long juridical process deeply analyzed by Malighetti (2004). This process also ended with the creation of the Reserva Extrativista Quilombo do Frechal (Maranhão state). An extractive reserve is an environmental protection area destined to be used by “traditional populations” according to their own customs for subsistence purposes. I conducted my fieldwork in this area from March to December 2006.

the “natural” environment through a different gaze. Initially I was unable even to distinguish a cultivated *roça* from spontaneous vegetation growth. I had “to train observation” in order to recognize how nature was socialized. In other words, it was a matter of seeing nature from the practical perspective of my interlocutors that was shaped by their own way of being practically “involved” in the environment in which they dwelt. As Ingold puts it, “apprehending the world is not a matter of construction but of engagement, not of building but of dwelling, not of making a view *of* the world, but of taking up a view *in* it” (Ingold 2000: 42).

Situating Movement in the Forest Space

The centrality of walking in the everyday life of the community introduces the importance of *movement* as a specific way of perceiving the environment and producing space (Munn 1996, Low 2003). Pandya underlines that “movement alone defines and constructs space”, while “space does not define and construct movement” (1990: 793). According to Tuan, space, understood as undetermined and abstract, is simply “given by the ability to move” (1977: 12). Quite in line with this perspective, De Certeau thinks about space as something “composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it” (1984: 117). He conceives space as a *practised place*; qualified as such by the original trajectories of those who run its paths. Whilst place is given and also immutable, space instead allows for the expression of the social actors’ agency. The act of *walking* becomes, according to De Certeau (1984: 96), the creative gesture that produces the real weft of its urban fabric, actuating a slight form of resistance against the obligations imposed by the structure of a place. Could we consider such approaches on movement and space consistent also in a natural milieu, where the signs of human sociality are visible just after a process of *education of attention* (Ingold 2000: 37)?

If we consider the strategic and creative character of the walking act, as proposed by De Certeau, a connection is possible. The *mato* was at the same time more constrictive and more flexible than an urban fabric. People used stable and regular communitarian paths for their movement in the “working space”, but they were also used to open extemporaneous passages in the vegetation, creating personal routes and modifying the environment. By walking in the *mato* with different people, I realized that everyone knew a different forest, defined by a very personal system of references. This space, perceived and lived by walking, was very much an *embodied* space, defined by “the intersection and interpenetration of body, space, and culture” (Low 2003: 10). In particular, my interlocutors ascribed a great significance to what I call the capacity of “situating movement”. What I mean by this expression, inspired by Ingold², is the capability of each person to individuate his/her own position within space correctly while penetrating the profundity of the forest; a skill of utmost importance to a community dependent on a swidden agro-forestry system. The choice of utilizing an expression such as “situating movement”, to refer to the methods my interlocutors took recourse to during the establishment of their own position in the forest, presupposes a twofold justification. The intention is to draw attention to the insignificance of orientation, meant as a reference to systems with objective coordinates, based on the cardinal points or “official” geographic localizations. As a matter of fact, *mato* space was not conceived via a hypothetical, external and dominant static point of observation, but rather through the viewpoint “of the walker”; that is via a perpetually mutable perspective, which the subject develops during the course of his or her movements. As Ingold observes:

People’s knowledge of the environment undergoes continuous formation in the very course of their moving about in it. [...] That process consists in the engagement of the mobile actor-perceiver with his or her environment. As I have already suggested, we know *as we go*, not *before we go* (2000: 230).

A fundamental element used to situate movement was the alternation between *roça* and *capoeira*. While a *roça* was an area under cultivation, a *capoeira* was “where a *roça* used to be.” The system was basically one of rotation; a *roça* took on the denomination of *capoeira* the very moment its harvesting was terminated. Similarly, a “ripe” *capoeira* - that is, a sufficiently well developed *mato* - could be deforested to convert it once more into a *roça*. Although land was considered an inalienable common property, the community acknowledged the single individual as having an exclusive “right of belonging” – which was not transferable through inheritance - on one or more *roças* at the same time, as well as on the successive *capoeiras*. Moreover, the same *areas of familiar belonging* existing in the village were mirrored within the *mato*. As the houses of close relatives were also built within close proximity of one another in the inhabited area, in a sim-

² Ingold argued that “It is [...] the ability to situate one’s current position [...] within a historical context of journeys previously made [...] that distinguishes the countryman from the stranger” (Ingold 2000: 219).



ilar manner *roça* and *capoeiras* were located following the same principle of proximity. Relationships among relatives within a *mato* were spatialized in such a way as to render the natural element the place of choice for the expression of domestic sociality. Therefore, everyone was more familiar with different parts of the *mato* and had a personal mapping of the “owners” of *roças* and *capoeiras*. Such a mapping became a resource “to situate movement” when a person was walking in the forest. In other words, the correct attribution of a *roça* or a *capoeira* to a legitimate “owner” was equivalent to knowing exactly “where one was”.

However, this kind of individual mapping changed every year because each *roça* was utilized for just one year. The first sign of rotational reorganization of forest space was the annual so-called “choice of the *mato*” to be deforested. During the course of their livelihood, people were inclined to rotationally use their *capoeiras* again and again. In cases such as these, walking to select the *mato* bore more of the configuration of constantly “returning” rather than that of really “going away.” It was a sort of “circumambulatory movement” (Tuck-Po 2008: 33), which enabled the individual to constantly learn how to find – or to regain – his or her own reference net within a weave of possible routes.

When vegetation had not grown back sufficiently or it was the first deforestation of a young community member, the search for new areas became instead indispensable. Due to the long resting periods of a *capoeira* – from a minimum of 3-4 years to a maximum of 10-12 years – the youngest individuals may perhaps not know anything about the previous users of a specific area. By walking within the *mato* accompanied by their most expert family members, they learned to attribute the *capoeiras* to their legitimate owners. In this manner, they gradually constructed their own mapping of the territory, which was essential for orientation but also for the granting of “respect” towards other community members. In order to deforest someone else’s *capoeira*, it was in fact compulsory “to ask for permission.” The *capoeira* could acquire a new ‘owner’ only when the previous one consented to the request.

In any case, the individual always had the obligation to signal any appropriation of the chosen forest zone. Despite the general organization of the agricultural work being of a collective³ type, the most creative phases were, nevertheless, a prerogative of the individual and were dependent on his or her “strategic” choices. These actually took on the shape of *territorializing acts*, meant as activities that transform a generic forest space into territory; that is, into a space under communitarian belonging, even though its use was exploited by a single person. The *baliza*⁴ left as a sign of *mato* demarcation, the *picada*⁵ delimiting the perimeter of the intended *roça*, the preparation of the small *virador*,⁶ and the final burning of the deforested area, were all fundamental passages designating the assertion of the individual within community life. At the same time, these ephemeral signs – impressed upon the *mato* – transformed themselves into fundamental references as a temporary definition of the individual’s own positioning within the forest space. Therefore, movement within the *mato* taught the individual how to “read” a natural environment through a process of visual enskillment.

Mapping Practices: A Network Of “Natural Places”

Walking in the *mato*, reconstructing the usual paths of forever-changing individuals, understanding the elements concerned with organizing territorial interpretation, and knowing the reference points on which their capacity to orientate was based; all of these in their totality have also implied reflection on the meaning that has been assumed by the concept of *place* within a forest space. According to Tuan, place is “a concretion of value” and constitutes a concrete and familiar reference (1977: 12). De Certeau, instead, defines place as “an instantaneous configuration of positions” that also implies “an indication of stability” (1984: 117). If “objective” mapping does not reflect the closely-woven net of references involved in organizing the effective fruition of spaces, what is acknowledged as “place” in a natural and alleged *continuum* which is perceived as being undifferentiated by an extraneous observer?

In Frechal places were, first of all, *names* – known only to community members – that identified those forest areas, where the usual subsistence activities were performed. Actually, the ephemeral rotation between *roça* and *capoeira* was integrated in an established division of territory into “natural places”. There were

³ It was based on a codified system of manpower exchange, known as *troca de dia* (day exchange).

⁴ A thin shrub used as signaling stone.

⁵ A narrow path in the vegetation.

⁶ Small, deforested *mato* portion.

mainly three types of utilized denominations. Some places alluded to physical and morphological characteristics of the area or to the presence of certain animals or plants, all of which thus became typifying as well as distinctive elements. The so-called *Velame* area, for instance, owed its name to the presence of a specific type of plant, similar to tobacco. Other places, instead, stirred up memories of times previous to the creation of the reserve in 1992 when the local nestor used the land for other purposes. For instance, two names, *Cafezal e Pimenta*, were given to places where coffee and chilli plantations used to be. Finally, places existed with a relation to anecdotes about the community's past events, such as the case of the subsidence known as *Baixa de Mauricio*. This place, for example, took its name from the person who had the honor of deforesting that area for the very first time.

If movement in the forest space was characterized by a pronounced, individual specificity, it is equally true that it was always imbedded within a steady network of shared places, where collective community memory had stabilized. In a context such as this, *to map practices* means to reconstruct a geography of the territory starting from the foundational character of the practices. In other words, places were "established" as a result of a community's pragmatic necessities and remembrances. As Ingold observes:

The native inhabitant may be unable to specify his location in space, in terms of any independent system of coordinates, and yet will still insist with good cause that he knows where he is. This is [...] because *places do not have locations but histories*" (2000: 219, emphasis added).

Conclusions

The article shows the impossibility of ever capturing in a single glance the forest in its entirety and as an objectively given space. It was never perceived by community members as a landscape, observed from a neutral, external point. Rather, the experience of this "socio-natural" environment was the product of the intersection between progressively changing trajectories of single individuals and socially-shared "natural places". It was the contingent result of an "ambulatory knowing" – or "knowledgeable ambulating" – (Ingold 2000: 230). Thus territorial mapping "from within", assembled as a result of my walking with the direct users of the forest, invites reflection also upon the potentialities of movement as an important corporeal methodological tool in ethnographic research (Tassan 2013).

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