Anthropology of Landscape

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Conclusions

Here we return to some of the key themes discussed in the introduction – materiality, embodiment, contestation and emotion – and the manner in which they are played out in the lives of persons in this particular landscape.

Back to materiality: what landscapes want and what they do

‘Landscape has been considered throughout this book as a ‘thing’, part of a wider category – material culture. From such a perspective it is the most difficult and complex kind of thing that we might study and that, for us, provides the underlying rationale for the study. To paraphrase Marx, people work and use this landscape under circumstances that are not of their own choosing. The landscape is always already out there; its sensuous material qualities, its shapes and colours endure. But humanized cultural landscapes, such as this, want and need embodied persons, because people form part of landscapes and vice versa. Materiality resides in the pebbles and the vegetation and the earth in relation to the inhabitation of people. The fact that persons may typically take the landscapes that they use and inhabit for granted and seemingly not think about them at all makes these landscapes all the more powerful in framing and producing identities and values. People of necessity act as part of the same material world that they inhabit. We have tried to show that the material character of this landscape is fundamental in the manner in which people both experience it and how they may subsequently think through, discursively
express and rationalize these experiences. A material landscape and a material mind coalesce to form part of each other. To the RM recruit the landscape that we have described may be a place of nightmares, that quite literally to use another of Marx’s phrases ‘weigh down on the brain of the living’. To others the same landscape is an endless source of joy and delight. But, whatever individual people think about it, this is the same material landscape.

To acknowledge that landscape can have multiple meanings and produce different emotional responses does not support a claim that they can mean anything, that landscape exists only in the mind. This is to stress that the manner in which people think is not the product of an untrammelled human mind that can think in any way it likes but is derived from embodied, perceptual, sensory and kinaesthetic experiences. Consciousness and embodied social being are always materially situated. Inevitably, different experiences of the same landscape give rise to varying personal and emotional responses. It would be bizarre if this were not the case. The material landscape is thus a highly variable resource for thought, both producing different kinds of responses in the manner in which it is encountered and constraining thought through its brute materiality. This is a position running counter to any crude form of idealism or cultural relativism in which there might be as many radically different manifestations and visions of a landscape as there are people to experience it. Landscapes are not inert; they are an active presence in which the identity of landscapes and the identities of people that inhabit them are indelibly intertwined so that they co-produce each other in dynamic ways that always change through time. Personal and social experience of a landscape is never totalizing, it is inevitably partial and from a point of view. Only an all-seeing and knowing God might be expected not to have a point of view. People take some material aspects and experiences and amplify them, inevitably ignoring others. This messy and ambiguous partiality of subjective experience is itself the outcome of a material relation.

Unnatural nature

This messiness is reflected throughout the discussions in the text of what nature is supposed to be. They emerge over and over again with different people and groups thinking through the term and understanding it differently. We have seen that NE and others manage nature in this particular case but that this is management undertaken in a cultural landscape that has been created and changed by people over thousands of
years, from the Bronze Age to the present. One of us, studying archaeology and anthropology at Cambridge in the mid-1970s, was taught that the next ice age was approaching, based upon the evidence of deep-sea ocean cores. Everyone was going to freeze to death. Now, in the age of the anthropocene, we know the reverse is the case: we are all going to fry. The point of mentioning this is that nature has never been stable. Change, not stasis, is the norm and the landscape we have been considering has been constantly altered by human activities over thousands of years, but in many discussions stability is still regarded as the primary and ‘natural’ state. It is perilous to disrupt a world that should ideally be stable.

Today culture has become what nature is. In the process nature has lost something of its own self-identity and otherness through the passage of time. Notions of purity and danger (Douglas 1966) often loom large in the manner in which nature is thought through. The best kind of nature is of the unsullied, pure sort. In the particular case that has been considered maintaining purity involves attempts to remove species that should not be there and manipulate others so that they are of the correct proportion and state of growth. Otherwise nature, left to itself, becomes both dangerous and endangered.

To various degrees nature may still be regarded, as we have shown, as an entity that is absolutely different from culture, or simply yet another manifestation of people and their activities. What is absolutely clear, whatever position may be taken, is that this is a valued concept and it is required for people to act and labour in the landscape. Maintaining a concept of nature and that there is a natural world is an indispensable source of meaning and value. So nature is a concept that has practical utility. It does work in the world and facilitates the social imaginary, the dream of a better future for ourselves and our children than what we currently have. The politics of nature is a protest against the manner in which capitalist economies produce environmental crisis. Although we might dispense with nature because we realize that it does not exist, we actually require nature to perform practical work in the world. Nature is, then, the medium and outcome of political practice.

Emotion is there: we are involved and nature thus becomes therapeutic. We care, and caring for nature is also about caring for the self, finding meaning in the world for many and a reason to live. A sense of the otherness and difference of nature is absolutely essential to anyone conserving the landscape. In this respect nature is perhaps best thought of as a purely political concept. It is required primarily in visions of a better life and a better society, a political tool. The ‘content’ of nature, what is supposed to be in or part of it, and that which resides outside, scarcely
matters to anyone other than academics. We might say it is just an intellectual game to be played. People think through the concept as they will but it needs to be there for them to be able to think about the landscape at all. To put it another way, nature and a natural world is absolutely essential to emotional well-being.

In debates about the futures of threatened landscapes nature is an indispensable part of a rhetorical armoury stimulating action, far more than being merely one side of an abstracted logocentric opposition to be textually deconstructed. Nature brings tears to people’s eyes; it is something worth fighting for, a reason for living and loving. Here we can recall a personal incident as a poignant illustration of the point. Chris was talking to a group of fifty people on an open day during the excavation of a prehistoric cairn. Having talked about the pebbles from which the cairn was made and what was found he mentioned the significance of the heathland landscape for our knowledge of the past. It had not been destroyed by ploughing, unlike most of lowland Britain, but was now under threat from topsoil scraping. A lady burst into uncontrollable sobbing because for her this would inevitably mean the end of the silver-studded blue butterfly, a species that she had spent years counting and monitoring, and it required bare ground in order to live.

Put in the broadest sense nature is discursive power. It enables and empowers resistance to the corrosive forces of capital and economic development. In this sense nature is indeed ‘good to think’, part of a politics of identity.

**Embodiment in practice**

Another key theme of the book has stressed embodied performative practices in the landscape. For the most part people know how to go on without explicitly thinking about what they are doing and why in a routinized and habitual manner, whether this is the RM recruits enduring their endurance course, environmental volunteers involved in scrub clearance or walkers, cyclists or horse riders traversing the landscape in various ways. They forget about their material bodily involvement until through exhaustion and pain they are forcibly reminded of it. Participation in environmental work, or in walking, or flying a model aircraft creates a dynamic interrelationship between people and landscape through which they come to know themselves. The emotions portrayed or acted out here may be those of an inner emotionality.
By contrast our artists’ emotional involvement may sometimes be highly conscious and thought through in the manner in which they respond to place. Yet the performing arts in particular provide aspects of experience that elude words, expressed through the medium of the body itself, and as such may be regarded as transformative. Phelan describes the performing body as ‘metonymic of self, of character … but in the plenitude of its apparent visibility and availability, the performer disappears and represents something else’ (Phelan 1993: 150). Thus embodied subjective feelings facilitate exploration of both self and other. They exemplify the manner in which shapes, forms, colour, touch and co-beings (people or fish or other animals in our discussions here) can become social and emotional agents for change and transformation. People both find themselves and lose themselves in landscapes in relation to different performative practices. Thus embodiment, like landscape, is a multifaceted concept relating mind to body and involving different types of consciousness: practical mastery or knowing how to go on in a particular material and social context or discursive expression; relationships with the earth, tools and instruments, animals and people.

A storied landscape: emotion, time, memory and place

Emotion and a feeling for place form an ontological basis for the human capacity to experience meaning. This is not something extraordinary but part of ordinary bodily experience, the means by which we touch the world and are in turn touched by it. Part of these processes of embodied knowledges involve the manner in which different individuals and groups create stories about this landscape and objectify these stories in relation to place through naming and activity, and the manner in which they approach places, directional and orientational relationships and move between them. These platial stories differ according to their material relationship with the landscape and the events that they recall. Personal biographies relate individuals to the landscape, so much so that they trace out part of their lives in terms of the places they have been and the work or activities that they have been involved with. Three of the groups we have considered – fishermen, model aircraft flyers and archaeologists excavating sites in the landscape – have a relationship to place that is primarily static; they repetitively go to the same places and may develop a particular affection for them. In this respect it is interesting to note that all these three groups have in different ways commemorated their dead in place in discreet ways: a favoured fishing spot; a plaque for a deceased...
flyer; personally by Chris, who scattered the ashes of Tor the dog on the excavated prehistoric cairn named after her, two years after the research project had ended.

The archaeologists also constructed a pebble memorial to George Carter, the pioneer and highly imaginative archaeologist who worked here in the 1930s.

This was in the form of a bird. Carter had suggested that he had seen the fragmentary representation of a bird on the surface of one of the prehistoric cairns that he had excavated on Woodbury Common (Carter 1936) and this and some of his other ideas had formed a background informing the excavations. The bird was made from pebbles that had been excavated from the nearby cairn, carefully selecting the colours to create a Dartford warbler, one of the key endangered species on the heathland. It was a symbolic act of engagement with the environmentalists that had resulted from a fraught relationship over conservation policy and practices with the archaeologists discussed at length in Chapter 2.

There are benches with plaques on Aylesbeare Common in the RSPB reserve, affording distant views that commemorate those who loved this place, and there is a spiritual tree near to Woodbury Castle decorated with ribbons and with offerings of flowers, materializing it as a place for
memories and performances. In these and a myriad of other small fleet-
ing practices that leave little or no trace people celebrate their personal
and emotional connection with this landscape as a place for memory
work. In this manner emotions become objectified and situated within
the landscape. Memory and place and how people construct a sense of
historicity in relation to a landscape in which pebbles are such an endur-
ing feature is the focus of another work (Tilley in prep.)

The maps we asked people to draw of the landscape in a more for-
mal and structured manner also materialize and name memories of both
path and place. For the heathland environmental managers they depict
this entire landscape in a ‘platial’ sense. It is the whole that is signifi-
cant for them in its internal relationships. Only one RM map showed the
entire heath and this was made by a senior officer, also responsible for its
entire management, but from a military and strategic point of view. For
others it is the part of the heath that is most familiar to them that is being
depicted. For some it is the sequential relationship between places along
walks taken or along a cycle or horse ride that are being shown. The
maps depict journeys actually made, sedimented into memory and the
ways in which places are encountered. They tell a story of encounter and
experience, a mode of inhabiting the world. Together these maps situate
personal, biographical and emotional attachments to place and have a
visceral connection to lived experience. We have briefly commented on
them in the text but in a way this is unnecessary. As a visual medium they
are another way of telling requiring no words.

This is a layered landscape, layered in terms of archaeological and
historical temporalities, layered in terms of places within it and tracks
to follow across it. Prehistoric monuments become stable and enduring
orientation points in the present while tracks shift and change in labyrin-
thine fashion, as do the patterns of vegetation and human association.
Places in the landscape are entwined as knots of meaningful associa-
tions that are very different from mere dots on a spatial map (Ingold
2007: 101). As we have seen in different chapters people working on and
using the heathlands have their own names for places. The RM name and
number places significant to them, so do archaeologists creating their
own names for places without them. Fishermen, environmental volun-
teers, horse riders, cyclists, walkers; all, as we have seen, create their own
and different relationships. These are their own names and are unknown
to others. They humanize this landscape, actively creating place out of
space, and their memories sit in these places and are recalled as they visit
or talk to others about them. Place memories are fundamental in estab-
lishing and maintaining social bonds. Each troop and generation of RM
recruits can share a common experience of this landscape in their ‘dits’. Like prehistoric monuments and tracks some names endure, others are lost to be replaced by others. Their presence or absence is part of an ongoing temporal dialectic of embodiment and experience.

**Topophilia and topophobia**

These two terms were coined by the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1974). By topophilia he refers to a love or an affection for place, somewhere we feel secure and at home. Topophobia is the reverse, a fear or a loathing of places in which we feel insecure. The archaeologists worked in three places in the east, north and on the west of the heathlands. Everyone, without exception, enjoyed the experience of working on Colaton Raleigh Common. Members of the team developed a particular emotional affection for the prehistoric cairns they excavated there. Here the team was high up and the location afforded sweeping views across the heath and sea. The view, the ever-changing weather and the patterns of the clouds were constant topics of conversation. Nobody enjoyed the experience of working at Jacob's Well, a place located in a bog in the midst of a gloomy pine plantation. The discovery of a dead and mutilated bird on the walk and very near to the site one morning led one female member of the excavation team to remark that this was a bad place. People who had worked previously on Colaton Raleigh Common high up in the open landscape preferred being there, enjoyed the experience more, and had developed a particular affection for that place. Indeed its memory was so strong that being anywhere else on the heathland afterwards became a lesser experience.

This is one of countless other little anecdotes that could be told about this landscape, illustrating the manner in which place memories and emotions are deeply embedded in sensory experience. A companion volume to this might consist solely of those stories. All those who work in or use the heathland have their own place memories, their own stories and their own ways to relate to and socially construct this landscape. Inevitably for some they are more extensive than others and become related to the heathland itself rather than particular places within it. For heathland managers the heath itself was platial in character. In other words they had no particular place preferences within it. As we have discussed, all RM recruits hate this heathland where they have undergone suffering on countless occasions, but if they return to it as trainers their attitude may change; it becomes a beautiful place. For some, particularly
artists and poets, this is a deeply spiritual landscape with mystical powers, to others it will always be a harsh, forbidding and cruel place. Memory sits in bodies in places in which past and present coalesce and find a new unity. Returning to place, experiencing its material presence plays an active role in recollection in a profound sense, linking persons and events, situating them in a landscape.

**Contestation: an ordinary landscape?**

The analysis presented in this book has tried to demonstrate the manner in which the particular landscape being considered is fractured, mutable, always in the process of becoming in which change rather than stasis is the norm. Different individuals and groups think about and engage with the landscape in radically different ways and this is significantly related to their activity and involvement. As a consequence landscape is contested either explicitly or implicitly. People may actively protest about the actions of others or, more usually, feel more or less resentful but keep these thoughts to themselves, just putting up with those things that they can do nothing about. Conflict is normal.

Some might argue that the study being presented is abnormal – most landscapes are not like this and the case in hand has been selected in a tautologous way to highlight precisely these aspects. When we began this research this was a landscape about which we knew very little. Its selection for an anthropological study was not based on any supposed potential for revealing conflict and contestation. The project was undertaken to run in tandem with an archaeological and historical study of the same landscape that was starting and for which it had been pre-selected as having considerable potential. Our research revealed, rather than set out to investigate, what was already there, and there is nothing that is either unusual or extreme about this particular case. Scratch the surface, we would argue, and all landscapes are like this. The details will inevitably differ but the widespread notion of harmony and stability in landscape use, meaning, value and perception only has any relevance today as a myth. In many respects this is an ordinary and mundane landscape differing little from others, except perhaps in relation to its particular geology, vegetation and history. People make of it what they will; indeed conflict is a vital part of what landscapes are and in a very real sense this gives landscapes their vitality and makes them into a living presence, something that matters, and gives them dynamism and emotional presence and value in people’s lives. A harmonious landscape would be one
that is socially dead, meaningless and irrelevant: conflict both engages and empowers in profound ways.

These conflicts over landscape and its meaning and significance are never likely to be about single issues such as whether or not a quarry development or that of a wind farm should go ahead, although they are typically considered and presented as such. They are always multiple and far more complex than that, opaque, stubborn and disparate mediums for thought and action. Some aspects of contestation are visible at the surface; others underlie them in layers within. Heterogeneity is the norm with landscape the palimpsest. Conflict resolution is not a kind of process with harmony being the outcome. Typically it involves compromise and muddling through, accepting in one way or another what others do, arriving at some form of at least tacit consensus, as with the relationships between environmentalists and the RM or between archaeologists and environmentalists – or the horse riders and walkers and cyclists discussed in the book, carrying on and muddling through. We might even say that this is a ‘very British’ compromise. Inevitably some issues are never resolved and persist; others, such as the legitimacy of a new quarry development, discussed in Chapter 5, fall into the background with the passage of time.

There is another sense of ordinariness that we wish to discuss that is highly relevant and important to a study of landscape. Throughout the book we have discussed a series of ordinary practices. There is nothing particularly unusual about people walking in a landscape, horse riding, fishing, cutting down a gorse bush or flying a model aircraft. These are all aspects of contemporary culture, taken for granted, rarely examined, seemingly perhaps not worth studying or taken as serious objects of study. But everywhere that we look the everyday and the ordinary become extraordinary. There is a plurality of different material practices and material worlds at play, from the manner in which a bike is ridden or the gear worn to the naming of fishing places, to the manner in which someone walks and relates to a dog. We find not homogeneity but endless diversity, flows of meaning and significance in situated small acts.

This we would argue is the locus of our contemporary culture. Look at a fisherman and you find a whole social and symbolic world in a relation between rod and lake. The ordinary is not a superficial manifestation of culture. It only presents itself as such and hides its enormous depth and complexity if we do not take it seriously. Start to investigate the surface and examine people, their practices and the materiality of the everyday and a new world is revealed, a lived world in which experience and
knowledge is embodied in the practices of people in relation to others and things. Grand theories such as Marxist perspectives on the social provide a depth ontology, as do structuralist perspectives but in a radically different manner. In both the mantra becomes: ignore the superficiality of everyday life. Dig deeper and you will find what is really going on – depth structures that generate the everyday that can be happily ignored as trivial, a theoretical tradition carried on in the writings of Bourdieu (1977), Giddens (1984) and others.

By contrast the broadly phenomenological perspective taken in this book aims to show that such a view of culture and society is fundamentally misguided. Depth, what really matters, does not reside deep down, underpinning or providing a foundation for culture. It resides within the surface and is everywhere around us. So the project of analysis becomes the recognition and the bringing forth to consciousness of the extraordinary character of the ordinary. That is another kind of grand project worth undertaking and here we have, no doubt, only been able to undertake it in a rudimentary manner. The methodology for doing this is simple and followed by all anthropologists. We attempt to understand this world through the process of immersing our embodied selves in it and participating in it. Our body, then, is our primary research tool. We are in that sense always part of and in the study. Whether acknowledged or not, all anthropological research is thus phenomenological research. Research becomes not an abstracted practice of applying external ideas and seeking generalities (sometimes strangely described as being objective) but arises from and is grounded in the study itself. Social and cultural anthropology as a discipline with grand pretensions to knowledge has always valorized discussions of social and political structures, attempted to unravel the intricacies of rituals and cosmologies and myth through its depth models. In its relative and continuing neglect of the humdrum material world in which people actually live, we might suggest, it has often been misguided about both its objects and subjects of study.

Another concomitant perspective that arises from a phenomenological intellectual tradition concerns the manner of representation: the manner in which research and its results get written into texts. The normative anthropological view is that there is a lower-level kind of activity that we term mere description and a higher level kind of activity called analysis. The two are separate and the former should inexorably lead to the latter. From the broadly phenomenological tradition on which we draw the two cannot be so neatly separated. The analysis is in the description. Observation and description are themselves social acts, part and parcel of a reflective and subjective creation of meaning and
significance. They are both highly selective in that we cannot describe and observe everything and what we do describe and observe depends on what we think might be important, and is always from a point of view in both a bodily and theoretical sense. So we always pre-frame our studies while, of course, trying to remain open to being surprised and in the process re-making the frame. In conclusions such as this the normative expectation is that the generalities, or in other words a series of decontextualized abstractions, will be brought out of previous descriptions, the plot or story of the book will become unravelled and presented as the fundamental essence of the rest. This is a perspective that we wish to have at least partially avoided here.

Landscape provides a powerful medium for anthropological thought not because we can pin it down and define its study, or indeed define what it is supposed to be – this or that, or something other. Its significance derives from it being a dynamic, holistic, material presence through which we can creatively think people’s social worlds, using the medium of the material world that they inhabit. That is the project of an anthropology of landscape. In lieu of further words we present a collage of images embodying personal memories.
Figure 12.2  Memory collage