

## Introducing “Nature on the Move” – A Triptych

trip·tych

*n.*

1. A work consisting of three painted or carved panels that are hinged together.
2. A hinged writing tablet consisting of three leaves, used in ancient Rome.
3. A set of three associated artistic, literary, or musical works intended to be appreciated together.

[From Greek *triptukhos*, *threefold* ...]<sup>1</sup>

In the spirit of *New Proposals* – a journal of interdisciplinary enquiry “dedicated to the radical transformation of the contemporary world order” – we are pleased to offer the following three papers. They are the outcome of a three-year process of conversation and engagement, characterised by both disagreement and excitement. Our shared concern has been how best to theorise and understand the socio-economic displacements we have each observed through studying and engaging with conservation policy and practice in varied contexts since the 1990s. We have witnessed landscapes, natures and peoples of the global south become increasingly entwined with market-oriented solutions to ecological and economic imperatives of improvement, with outcomes that can intensify inequitable patterns of fortune and misfortune in both social and environmental registers. We have documented the occlusion of local and indigenous knowledges and concerns, alongside the amplification of specific wildlife populations and consumptive access to these by foreign tourists. We have noted that conservation successes, such as increased

<sup>1</sup> Definitions from <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/triptych> and <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/triptych>.

incomes from ecotourism and strengthened numbers of “big game,” frequently are accompanied by a paradoxical entrenching of detrimental environmental impacts globally through emissions-related climate change and amplified material consumption generally. And we have wryly observed the myriad displacements effected in a growing *zeitgeist* claiming that such effects can be “offset” by paying for conservation investments somewhere else. As environmental activists remind us, on a single planet limited by the borders of space, there is no “elsewhere;” there is no “away.” With others, we have experienced attempts to silence and close down interventions that state concern at some of the socioecological displacements and injustices we have observed.<sup>2</sup> Whilst celebrating the resilience and diversity of struggles globally, we see

<sup>2</sup> For examples and discussion, see Sullivan (2003), Holmes (2007), the policy report published by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) (Igoe and Sullivan 2009) and the collection of pieces in a special issue of the policy oriented online journal *Current Conservation* 3(3). The website [www.justconservation.org](http://www.justconservation.org), co-founded by two of us (Igoe and Sullivan) in collaboration with a broader network of people who are academics, practitioners and activists – and sometimes all of these - makes publicly available documented instances of displacement due to conservation interventions.

these closures as connected with broader hegemonic dynamics that seek to create (or at least appear to create) a consenting “civil society” by reducing resistance possibilities and the expression and practice of radical alternatives.<sup>3</sup>

We first presented the following three papers in June 2011 at a shared panel, chaired by Human Geographer Prof. Noel Castree, at the conference *Nature™ Inc.: Questioning the market panacea in environmental policy and conservation* organised by the Institute for Social Studies, The Hague, where one of us (Bram Büscher) works.<sup>4</sup> In this panel we sought to depart a little from standard conventions of lumping together papers under a panel title that more-or-less speaks to their emphases. We wanted to see instead if we could produce separately authored papers with distinct contents and approaches, that worked in relationship with each other such that each piece spoke to and developed themes expressed in the other pieces. We spent time listening to, engaging and disagreeing with each other’s perspectives, asking others to mediate our disputes and sometimes declaring to withdraw our work entirely. We mention this by way of acknowledging that academic collaborations are the outcome of affective as well as intellectual relationships, requiring work and persistence that may be invisible, but that is nonetheless essential, in shaping the final “product.”

On presentation of the papers at *Nature™ Inc.*, Anthropologist Prof. James Fairhead commented that they had the quality of a “triptych”: of three complementary “panels,” each of which is indispensable to the meaning of the whole. For us, this characterisation of our three pieces as a triptych has illuminated what we have been attempting to do. It has firmed up for us a sense of the aesthetic rhythm of our methods for telling our particular and combined “stories” of “Nature on the Move,” as well as refining our intention to write three separate pieces that nonetheless say more (we hope) when read in combination than alone.

3 See, for example, Igoe (2005), Sullivan et al (2011), Büscher (2013), MacDonald (2013) and Fletcher (under review).

4 See Arsel and Büscher (2012) and the special issue of *Development and Change* that it introduces for some of the papers presented at this conference.

The first “panel” is Bram Büscher’s initial rendering of “Nature on the Move.” He describes the myriad ways in which conserved and relatively untransformed natures are being repackaged as monetized and financialized products that can move in the world so as to accumulate speculative financial or more general ephemeral values. He notes parallels with the movements of “fictitious capital” circulating in the world as debt, credit, options, futures and other derivative products so as to enhance investment portfolios without entailing a corresponding movement of the material items on which these derived products are based. Büscher’s panel is a homage to and creative extension of Marx’s analysis of capital as “money in process,” “value in process” (Marx 1976:256), and comprises the inspiration for the triptych as a whole. To speak once again of paradoxes, the products “embodying” this “liquid nature” – that include entities such as carbon options and futures, and that seem set to include new commodities of biodiversity such as species credits and biodiversity offsets – are connected rhetorically with environmental aspects but designed to circulate so as to generate “green” economic growth that seemingly is decoupled from environmental impacts. The concern is that adding to the frenzied and homogenising metrological world of financial liquidity also adds to a world of booms, busts, bubbles and bonuses. This is a rhythm associated structurally with plutonomic tendencies, and thus with strident and deepening global inequalities (cf. OECD 2013). It seems antithetical to the material or societal requirements of equitable socio-ecological sustainabilities based on emplaced diversities, and thus warrants diagnostic and critical attention.

The triptych’s second panel by Jim Igoe draws attention to the ways in which the “fictitious conservation” engendered by this circulation of an objectified and conceptually spliced nature, has its roots in an earlier and intensifying modern impetus. This entailed the stilling and commodification of conserved nature through the production and circulation of images of constructed wild natures deemed valuable for viewing and conservation. Igoe extends Büscher’s (post/neo?) Marxist political economy analysis by drawing into the frame insights from

two of France’s most incisive post-Marxist theorists. He builds on situationist artist-activist Guy Debord’s observations regarding the structuring effects of mass-produced and circulated images to highlight the multiplicitous ways that society-environment relationships are increasingly mediated by value-generating images. These selectively “spectacularise” landscapes and people-nature relationships and thereby encourage the (re)making of landscapes and associated peoples such that they accord with empowered images. As such, and following Michel Foucault, he argues that Debordian spectacle constitutes aspects of wider techniques and technologies of government, thereby aligning and entraining the production of nature, and of society-nature relationships, so as to accord with the particular and empowered projections associated with a milieu of “nature conservation” (also see MacDonald 2010; MacDonald and Corson 2012).

In the final panel of the triptych Sian Sullivan draws attention to varied animist “culture-nature ontologies” – the suppression and purification of which is an ongoing requirement for the entrenching of a modern worldview that consolidates “nature” as deadened and mute object. Arguably, it is the associated possibilities for bending this objectified nature to the instrumentalisations of an emergent and capitalised technoscience that lies at the heart of many of the environmental imperatives driving conservation practice today. The piece is a continuation of a broader poststructuralist and feminist political ecology endeavour that problematises the foreclosures of animist culture-nature ontologies that are other to, and othered by, modernity’s great divide. It adds to attempts to refract this foreclosure by bringing into the frame different culture-nature knowledges and practices from varied cultural, contemporary and historical contexts. These share characteristic approaches towards “nonhuman nature” as a relational sphere of lively subjectivities, desiring life too. Drawing on ethnographic field experience in multiple contexts, and in alignment with the theorists and ethnographers by whom she is inspired (of which Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Donna Haraway, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Jerome Lewis, Tim Ingold, James Fairhead, Bruno Latour and Silvia

Federici deserve mention) her suggestion is a normative, ethical and hopeful one. Namely, that there is much of relevance in animist onto-epistemologies and associated extant, as well as subjugated, practices that is worth (re)countenancing in the course of engendering socionatural alternatives with desirable eco-ethical effects.

In introducing our “triptych” we acknowledge a resonance with the astonishing *Millennium Triptych* painted in the late 1400s by the Dutch artist Hieronymous Bosch (available for viewing at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Garden\\_of\\_Earthly\\_Delights](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Garden_of_Earthly_Delights)). In this the left panel depicts a Garden of Eden innocence and harmony between “man,” “God” and “beast.” Seemingly inspired in part by colonial encounters with New World indigenes, often described by observers as existing in a state of abundant reciprocity with the exotic plant, animal and spirit entities inhabiting their environs, the panel generates a sense of calm, spaciousness and coherence of meaning.<sup>5</sup> The centre panel, known as “The Garden of Earthly Delights,” portrays an intense proliferation of spectacular but meaningless consumption – what one commentator describes as “an erotic derangement that turns us all into voyeurs, a place filled with the intoxicating air of perfect liberty.”<sup>6</sup> The right panel moves on to convey a horizonless dark hell of unspeakable torment and destruction, seemingly the cumulative outcome of the spectacular and thoughtless consumptive delights of the previous panel.

There is something of an echo of these themes in our triptych, but in the reverse order. Echoing Büscher’s opening piece, John Berger (1999:1-2)<sup>7</sup>, for example, has described the third panel of Bosch’s triptych as “a strange prophecy of the mental climate imposed on the world ... by globalisation and the new economic order,” that generates “the conquest of the entire world through the market... subject to no control except the logic of investment.” As in Igoe’s following paper, Berger (1999:2) sees this ‘mental climate’ as consolidated by a claustrophobic “world

<sup>5</sup> Even if already prescient of “the Fall” represented by God’s introduction in this panel of the biblical Adam to his consort Eve.

<sup>6</sup> Peter S. Beagle, quoted in Belting (2005:7).

<sup>7</sup> We are grateful to Ranjan Bhattacharyya for drawing our attention to this piece.

picture” – or spectacularised CNN “wilderness of separate excitements” – controlled by the “delinquent need to sell incessantly,” and generating a world of surplus peoples forced to the jagged edges of market rationalisations.

Fittingly for a journal that embraces Marxist and anthropological commentaries regarding multiplicitous possibilities for struggle, Berger connects his observations of Bosch’s *Millennium Triptych* with the pieces of the global puzzle identified in a late 1990s letter to the world press by SubCommandante Marcos (1997) – sent from the infamous and ongoing Zapatista struggles in Chiapas, south-east Mexico. In this, the first piece “has the shape of a dollar sign and is green” and “consists of the new concentration of global wealth in fewer and fewer hands and the unprecedented extension of hopeless poverties” (Berger 1999:2; Marcos 1997). The second piece “consists of a lie,” a totalising and spectacularised rationalisation publicising that there is no alternative – that history has ended with the steep-sided plutonomic pyramid of distribution encouraged by neoliberalism. Connected with these pieces are those of emigration, precarity, landlessness, organised crime, physical repression, and the fragmentations of the nation state produced by “free trade zones” and money’s freedom to move across borders creating new frontiers and breakages. But the final piece is in the form of heterogenous pockets of resistance. Of “a refusal of the world-picture implanted in our minds” (Berger 1999:3; Marcos 1997) and a reciprocal imagining of other horizons, other rationalities, that can be walked towards, collaboratively. These pieces of the puzzle again are reminiscent of the movement of themes we pursue in the three “panels” of the triptych that follows.

Our invocation here of “*Zapatismo*” seems appropriate. We understand this as a practical orientation to diagnosis and contestation that is inspired by Marxist political economy, class struggle and revolutionary praxis; but that also refracts this through an embeddedness in indigenous communitarianism and the production of egalitarianism, as well as via a culture-nature cosmology that personifies the nonhuman with significant eco-ethical effects. It is towards this vitality of a refracted Marxism and its potential

and promise for radical change and ‘magical’ subversions that we offer this triptych.<sup>8</sup>

We are honoured to also welcome a constructive-critical discussion paper by Marxist geographers Noel Castree and George Henderson to be published in a following issue of this journal, and we invite broader engagement in service to the journal’s stated desire to create a more just, humane, and we would add ecoculturally sensitive, world.

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<sup>8</sup> See also Merrifield (2011).

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