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Casting Things as Actors in the Peruvian Landscapes of Mining Conflict

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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Casting Things as Actors in the Peruvian Landscapes of Mining Conflict

Review by Kristina Baines

Unearthing Conflict: Corporate Mining, Activism, and Expertise in Peru

by Fabiana Li

Duke University Press, 2015

In *Unearthing Conflict*, Fabiana Li presents a purposeful and careful opening up of the concept of “conflict” to include “people, places and things,” and the complex relationships between them, in the context of mining conflict in Peru. As expected from quality ethnography, she “goes deeper” than a dichotomous pro/con arguments of resource extraction, explicitly tackling how non-human elements in the landscape, what she refers to as “things,” have taken on a critical role in the politics of extraction in Peru.

Using multiple historical analyses and two notable case studies, the discussion of lead pollution in La Oroya and the conflict surrounding the mining of Cerro Quilish in Cajamarca, Li proposes equivalences as a tool for understanding how mining negotiations occur and how conflicts are generated. Her discussion of equivalence is subtle in terms of whom this process serves. She demonstrates through a skillful weaving of history, ethnography and theory that it enables both the conflict, and the space in which comparisons can be made and different forms of value understood and negotiated. Showing that the technical language, devices and measurement associated with the scientific monitoring and explanation of environmental impacts compare to other ways of knowing and inhabiting the landscape, she proposes that this “ontological multiplicity” can somehow be reconciled for mining conflicts, opening up the potential of grassroots movements to work within this flexible space to make real changes in national politics.

Part I, “Mining Past and Present,” begins this journey into the making of a dichotomous discussion of mining conflicts into a consideration of multiple “things.” It offers a history of mining

that goes beyond a discussion of “human agency” to include structural factors, process, actors, and their roles in defining the landscape. It traces the history of pollution and what it means to be polluted, “scientifically and in the socio-political imagination,” both from an external, or environmental, perspective and an internal, or bodily, perspective.

Part II, “Water and Life,” confronts one of the most ubiquitous features of the Peruvian landscape, the movement of water, and describes irrigation canals as “entangled social and natural histories.” Li uses classic features of culture and describes how they amount to more than cultural identity: the intersection of human and non-human phenomena, the reconfiguring of place, the mobilization of kinship, the articulation of habits or *costumbre*, and different classificatory systems. This discussion shows how place was and is “made” through a complex convergence of practices and ideas and is not simply distillable.

Part III, “Activism and Expertise,” consists of a chapter of focused attention on the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), both as an artifact, or “thing,” and a way of demonstrating the “competing ways of making equivalences” essential to Li’s problematizing of the conflict dichotomy. It provides a much needed and continued “critique of the participatory process” in which corporations elicit the participation of mining communities while actually disempowering them through a shift in perspective from “*corporate* accountability to *shared* responsibility.”

One particularly valuable point, which Li’s focused critique of conflict as simply a dichotomous tension brings to light, is that specific indigenous articulations of the natural world are neither “invented” or pre-existing but are expressed in specific ways when it becomes politically necessary. These articulations, the idea of Apu as an example, are part of everyday practice. “Indigenous knowledge” is not fixed but responsive and pragmatic, and its use in these global discourses is not some kind of strategy but the nature of how knowledge and practice exist and become salient. This, again, is an important contribution to this conversation and might have been emphasized even more, pushing against the characterization of static and inflexible indigenous communities by corporate and government forces in many parts of the world. Delving into the literature on Traditional Ecological Knowledge might have sent Li into a rabbit hole, however, this responsiveness, and how science is similarly flexible, is supported in this literature and may have contributed to further examination of the “belief” versus “fact” divide.

While *Unearthing Conflict* is clearly based on skilled and rich ethnographic work, I found myself sometimes wishing it felt more ethnographically reflexive. Some of the most evocative moments in the book are ethnographic: the one in which Li visits a daycare center and is invited to watch how “normal” a child with an extreme lead content in his blood is behaving, or another in which

she recounts how a woman loses her job preparing meals for mining workers after a surprise visit from a mining company representative and an honest admission of using water from the creek, stand out as powerful examples of the convergence of bodies and landscapes and the other “things” that exemplify the nuances of the conflicts the book tackles. These moments are well-done and illustrative, and I cannot help but want more of them.

Li delves into much foundational literature to ground her analyses and argument, for example using Latour to frame her thoughts about science and technology expertise. It was notable to read ideas about discipline and surveillance, recording of public questions and concerns at the EIA meeting, and bodies without a mention of the ways in which Foucault has put these ideas together, or read a discussion of pollution and the body without a reference to Douglas. To be fair, though, Li tackles weighty theoretical histories and topics in neoliberalism, environmentalism, science and technology studies, NGOs, corporations, activism, and indigeneity, so perhaps suggesting that she start down the road of critical medical anthropology is asking way too much.

This book does a lot and it does it well. It will be helpful not only in providing a rich foundation for studies of mining conflict in Peru, but also for students and scholars really looking for a way to illuminate the complexities of the common reality of community/government/corporate conflict over resource extraction in the name of “development” throughout Latin America and beyond.

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