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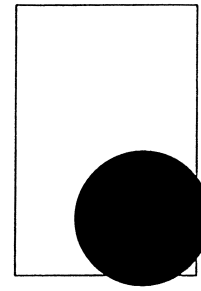

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Fire and identity as matters of concern in Corsica

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Abstract

This article connects the recent anthropological interest in human/non-human assemblages with one of the hoariest problems to haunt anthropologists of identity and nationalism: the question of the link between people and land. Drawing on elements of a Latourian 'sociology of associations' and on theories of distributed cognition, the article unpacks divergent ways of watching forest fires on the French island of Corsica. In Corsica, fires are often treated as revelatory of the real differences between insiders who love the land and outsiders who merely 'visit'. The article argues that unpacking the multiple connections between people and things which are made and remade in the process of watching fires can get us beyond the classic anthropological analysis of such claims as 'rhetorical', 'metaphorical' or 'imaginative', without however falling into the trap of radical alterity – a false alternative which has too often dogged the anthropological study of identity.

Key Words

assemblages • constructivism/essentialism • distributed cognition • exclusion • fire • France (Corsica) • identity • landscape

INTRODUCTION: CORSICANS AND CORSICA

A widespread feature in accounts of Corsica is the intimation that Corsicans have a privileged and essential link with the island as a physical object. This link can take many forms. The starkest version is to be found in the underground nationalist paramilitary organizations which target the infrastructure of the French state and the holiday homes of Continental French residents in the name of a fight against the 'colonization'[1] of the island. A peaceful variant of this theme can be found in the official pronouncements of nationalist parties such as the coalition *Corsica Nazione* whose spokesman explained to representatives of the French State that '[Corsicans are] a people which has been *forged in the mountains*, which has its language, its culture, its history, which has *clearly defined frontiers*' (Cuq and De Roux, 1997; my emphasis). Moving from the political to the

anodyne, this link to the island is also reflected in the fairly widespread habit amongst Corsican men and women of wearing a gold pendant in the shape of the island around their necks. In Corsican literature, as in proverbs and everyday speech, an enduring connection between Corsica and Corsicans is also often posited despite the evidence of important out-migration, with assurances that 'a Corsican never leaves [the island], he is just absent for a while' (see Jaffe, 1999: 53ff.). And indeed, amongst Corsicans who live on the French mainland or even further afield, many regularly spend holidays and eventually retire on the island. There is certainly a widespread expectation that they will do so (Jaffe, 1999).

Depictions of an essential link between Corsicans and Corsica also have a long history in self-consciously external accounts by continental French travellers, such as Auguste Blanqui, who wrote in 1838 that '[Corsica] rises out of the Mediterranean as a volcanic mass, and the character of its inhabitants is similar to the geological makeup of the land' (Blanqui, 1995 [1838]). Today, tourist brochures aimed at the continental French, still often portray the land and the people as an elemental unit, to be 'discovered' together – as the main French guidebook, Le Guide du Routard, puts it,

> the first duty of the traveller in Corsica is to make friends amongst Corsicans. Like every island . . . Corsica needs to be deserved. You will need time, real curiosity, and true love to discover its secrets. Know that she will need the same time to get used to you and allow you to step behind the postcard. (Guide du Routard, 2003: 28)

As these various examples suggest, associations between Corsicans and Corsica are implicitly or explicitly understood against the background of the more superficial link to the land attributed to various non-Corsicans (and primarily the continental French) living on or visiting the island. As in many other European contexts where tourism is an important feature of local life, these distinctions are centrally concerned with visuality. Relations to the land are often cast in terms of a distinction between 'locals' who have an essential attachment to and deep knowledge of the land and 'visitors' who merely come to look at the landscape, whose understanding is 'superficial' and 'stereotyped', who may, or may not be allowed to 'step behind the postcard'.

This article will examine one striking case in which such distinctions between locals and visitors, Corsicans and non-Corsicans, are mobilized: that of the violent fires which often ravage the Corsican countryside and forests at the height of the summer tourist season.

The schoolmaster of the village of Crucetta[2] regaled me on a number of occasions with the tale of the very serious blazes which had erupted near the village in previous years. Himself the owner of one of the outlying villas, he described how villagers, such as he, had helped the firefighters battle the flames which threatened their homes. In an indulgent but amused aside, he noted that the continental French families who rented flats in the area for the summer could be seen running out of their homes with their possessions on their heads while the Corsicans stood firm. Other Corsicans I met told more acid or outraged stories of tourists taking snapshots of the fires – stories which went to illustrate the general lack of sensitivity of visitors for whom the island was a mere 'backdrop'.

The notion of divergent relations to the land(scape) finds echoes within social scientific writing. From Raymond Williams (1975) to Pierre Bourdieu (1990), the idea

of a disjunction between 'insiders' who *live* their place and 'outsiders' who *objectify* it has had a strong influence on anthropological theorizing. This is sometimes flanked by the notion of divergent cultural relations to space and place – a western objectifying 'gaze' versus various non-western alternative experiences of place. In the case of Corsica, anthropologist Dominique Verdoni has suggested that a traditional, qualitative, differentiated rationality of space characteristic of Corsican society can theoretically be counterposed to the indifferent technocratic space increasingly characteristic of western modernity (Verdoni, 1996: 85ff.). In a similar vein, the anthropology of tourism has often also drawn on a duality between insiders and outsiders, front-stage and backstage, official and local knowledge – although the reader is usually reminded that these form opposite ends of a 'continuum' (Boissevain, 1996).

Boissevain's reminder points to a slight wariness on the part of social scientists when it comes to describing a link between people and land. Eric Hirsch for instance, has pointed out that stark oppositions between insiders who live their landscapes and outsiders who merely view it, such as that in Williams' account, smack of romanticism since they suggest that insiders are somehow more 'natural' than outsiders (Hirsch, 1995: 13). More radically, students of nationalism have long since highlighted the rhetorical and ideological use of land and territory in imaginations of community (Gellner, 1983; Handler, 1984; Anderson, 1991). In the case of France, Anne-Marie Thiesse has argued that notions of a visceral link between regional populations and the land upon which they lived, were once a key component of the nation-building project of the Third Republic – producing the essential unity of the 'small (regional) fatherland' as a building block for the 'great (national) Fatherland' (Thiesse, 1997). For Thiesse, the regionalist movements, which rose up against the centralizing French state in the 1960s and 1970s, unwittingly inherited much of this originally state-sponsored rhetoric of regional 'heritage' (*patrimoine* – Thiesse, 1997: 120). In such accounts, the link between people and land is treated as a powerful (and often rather unsettling or dangerous) 'metaphor'.

At the risk of simplifying, therefore, one might detect an oscillation in anthropological writing between, on the one hand, accounts which implicitly shore up claims about the privileged link between a people and a place by pointing out the 'deeper' relationship to place of particular cultural modes of being, and on the other hand, accounts which debunk the rhetorical or metaphorical use of land for political purposes.

Whereas the former approach assumes difference as its analytical starting-point, the latter broadly 'deconstructive' approach has been criticized for starting from an assumption of similarity. Karen Sykes, for instance, has noted that '[g]iving politics a kind of priority in cultural analysis gives the upper hand to Euro-American definitions of culture over those common in distant places' (Sykes, 2007: 46). Even more radically, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has argued, in an influential piece that has been taken as the marker of an 'ontological turn' in anthropology, that

> [t]he epistemological democracy usually professed by anthropology in propounding the cultural diversity of meanings reveals itself to be, like so many other democracies with which we are familiar, highly relative, since it is based 'in the final instance' on an absolute ontological monarchy, where the referential unity of nature is imposed. (Viveiros de Castro, 2003)

One might well adapt the argument to this particular case: to insist on the metaphorical nature of the link between Corsican people and Corsican land, would be to reduce such claims to a politicized trope overlaid onto a familiar reality in which land and people are, of course, separate. Furthermore, the trope itself is immediately recognizable and familiar: is it not another predictable offspring of 19th-century romantic nationalism (see for instance Kuper, 2005)? Through the prism of this particular analytic, the supposed difference of Corsicans from non-Corsicans, which such claims attempt to establish, is explained away as little more than froth on the surface of an ocean of similarity.

This ontological critique of the social constructivist literature is timely and well met. However, it risks sending us back once again from the pillar of sameness to the post of difference. This is at least the case if the alternative to depicting otherness as a mere political construct, is a more or less strategic emphasis upon radical alterity, making of anthropology 'the science of the ontological self-determination of the world's peoples' (Viveiros de Castro, 2003: 18).[3]

Corsica in and of itself forces the analyst to reconsider this alternative: for the foremost issue in debates around Corsica, ethnographically speaking, is precisely the question of Corsican difference from the French: to what extent does it obtain, and of what kind is it? Thus the anthropologist is likely to write past much of the action if he or she begins *either* with the assumption that this difference is the basic datum from which the analysis should proceed, *or* with the assumption that this difference is a mere rhetorical construct.

By contrast to the latter tendency, this article does not treat the association between Corsicans and Corsica as ideology, rhetoric or even as a metaphor; nor does it, as commentators have sometimes done in such cases, insist condescendingly upon its 'emotional' importance to participants, or praise it as 'strategic essentialism'. Rather more controversially, the article explores ethnographically (i.e. takes seriously) the surprising *resilience* of the link between people and place in the Corsican context, which points to a solidity far beyond the realm of the metaphorical. By contrast to the former tendency, however, the article also suggests that it take some explicit and reductive work to transform this resilient link into some kind of radical alterity, something which distinguishes 'insiders' from 'outsiders', or 'Corsicans' from 'the French'.

THE RESILIENCE OF THINGS

Resilience is a problem for anthropologists writing after the heyday of social constructivism. For instance Yael Navaro-Yashin has recently shown through the example of Turkey, the way in which 'the State', although devoid of any fixed or timeless essence, still resists critique and deconstruction (2002). Far from being mere 'false consciousness', the state continued to play a part in the everyday lives of people who were thoroughly cognizant and critical of statist ideology. A similar problem has been central to the anthropology of identity (formerly of 'ethnicity') since its very inception. Since a long line of social theorists – Edmund Leach (1964), Fredrik Barth (1969), Pierre Bourdieu (1980), Gerd Baumann (1999) and Bruno Latour (2005) amongst others – have conclusively made the case that social groups are effects of continuous process rather than expressions of fixed essences or structures, then how is one to explain the patent *resilience* of some such groups? The answers of theorists in the field of the anthropology of identity have been important and varied (see Macdonald, 1993; Grillo, 2003; Harrison, 2003

for some overviews), but in this article I will follow up Latour's suggestion that the resilience of society comes in part from the non-human components that are intricately woven into its fabric. Imagined in isolation, simple face-to-face social interaction between humans is a relatively weak and transient 'glue' (2005). Society is durable to a great extent because it is an assemblage of people and things; heterogeneous elements which extend and expand each other's grasp (2005).

Following this line of argument, this article suggests that we need to take seriously the manifold connections between people and things (including places) in the Corsican context in order to outline the very solid assemblages out of which even the most obviously 'rhetorical' or 'romantic' claims about an inalienable link between people and land derive their resilience and power. An extremely powerful account of attachments between people and place in Corsica can be found in (Galibert, 2004), whose inspiration is in many ways similar to that of the argument made here. I unfortunately came across this reference when this article was at proof stage, and thus too late to do it justice here, but see Candea (n.d.). Fires give us an unbeatable vantage point on this issue.

FIRE

I had been living in the Corsican village of Crucetta for 10 months when, on the afternoon of the 29 June 2003, my upstairs neighbour hailed me as I was returning home from visiting a continental friend. My neighbour was a lady living on the third floor of the tall stone house in the basement of which I was renting a flat, and like many of the elderly female inhabitants of the village, she spent a non-negligible amount of time sitting at her window staring at the world outside. What she had caught sight of this time however, was not a neighbourhood dispute, but an ugly black column of smoke rising towards the nearby village of Murettu. She had been watching it for some time and the movement of the smoke suggested that the flames were progressing up the far side of the next large hill. I went down to the square outside the tiny town hall, a flat tarmac-covered expanse filled with parked cars, which afforded astounding views of the coastline and the surrounding hills. As I had expected, a group of elderly male villagers sat on the stone wall, watching the progress of the fire. I joined them.

AN AEROTHERMOCHEMICAL PHENOMENON WHOSE PROPERTIES DEPEND ON THE SCALE ON WHICH IT DEPLOYS ITSELF

Such wild fires are a regular problem in Corsica, flaring up nearly every summer in the forests and underbrush of the island. The particularly dry and hot summer of 2003 was especially disastrous – 16,000 hectares of woodland burnt down in Corsica during that year (against 14,000 for the rest of France put together).[4] From the partial vantage point of Crucetta, one was able to spot a fire (near or far) almost every day throughout the month of August. In fact, 2003 was so severe that the French national research body, the CNRS, mandated its Physical Sciences of the Environment department, based at the Corsican university in Corte, to create a new unit for the experimental study of fires. According to this unit's own definition, fire is 'an aerothermochemical phenomenon whose properties depend on the scale on which it deploys itself',[5] hence the need to study it in controlled conditions 'on the scale of the field' (*à l'échelle du terrain*), by organizing experimental burnings in delimited areas of the island. These experimental fires are measured and in the near future will be modelled electronically and made available

online through software developed by a researcher at the university of Corte.[6] In order to organize such experimental burnings, the university of Corte and its scientific partners, including the CNRS, established a five-year partnership convention (*une convention de partenariat*) with a number of other actors including the Regional Natural Park of Corsica, the National Office of Forestry and the Departmental Service of Fire and Rescue for Southern Corsica.[7]

Bruno Latour has aptly opposed to the notion of indisputed 'matters of fact' that of disputed 'matters of concern'. Certainly not imaginary, nor yet stable 'objects', matters of concern are real and yet uncertain entities which are the focus of ongoing dispute, interest and controversy: GMOs, genes, the Gulf Stream, the social life of chimpanzees (Latour, 2004, 2005: 125ff.). Wild fires in Corsica are a prime example of a matter of concern in this sense.

The definition of a fire as a phenomenon whose properties depend upon the scale on which it deploys itself seems particularly apt, as the fires of 2003 deployed themselves as a matter of concern all the way from the Corsican forests and *maquis* (scrubland) to the national research institute and – through this effortlessly multi-scalar partnership between departmental, regional and national entities (each with its own address in the town of Ajaccio) – back to the Corsican *maquis* where they culminated in the propagation of a new set of fires, experimental, controlled fires this time, fires born to change the nature of firefighting.

Indeed, the aim of the research as set out in the convention is to enhance the practices of firefighting teams, through the development of an accurate model allowing the prediction of the spread of fire ahead of real-time. But the research should also produce scientific evidence to inform firefighting practices such as appropriate safety distances for firefighting personnel and the critical mass of scrubland beyond which pre-emptive 'directed burning' is necessary to check the spread of potential fires.[8]

WATCHING A FIRE

Back in the village square, on the afternoon of the 29 June 2003, the fire's presence was becoming more clearly defined. More defined visually, as the first flames appeared on the outline of the hill, a testimony to the fire's progress towards us. More defined too, in a range of other ways. Besides the visible flames and smoke, the fire was taking shape in our discussion, acquiring an origin and a set of potential futures, opening up questions and performing, along the way, various operations of social engineering.

Let us begin with origins. A number of cross-cutting reports located the origin of the fire by the reservoir on the Murettu road – a thin strip of tarmac snaking along the hillside between ours and the neighbouring village. 'Not an accident', one of the men said knowingly. He had been here when the fire started and had seen cars gathering suspiciously around the reservoir. His comment caused little stir however, partly because the evidence was slight, and partly because the human responsibility for fires in Corsica is as common an explanation as it is difficult to ascertain. Fires bring into stark relief a series of liminal and problematic figures who channel in various ways the search for causality. The 'pyromaniac' (*pyromane*) is the generic designation used in common parlance for fire-starters. Sometimes this is used in the literal sense of a mentally unstable individual obsessed with fire. One of our little group told a presumably well-rehearsed story of meeting such a figure, a pyromaniac who had been responsible for devastating

fires in the 1980s. 'Ask him for a light' the nurse in charge of the pyromaniac had said. When our storyteller did, he saw the patient transfixed, fascinated by the flame. 'Let me look after him', our storyteller had told the nurse, 'I'll throw him off a bridge somewhere'. In this case, the causal origin of the fire gets lost in the maze of an unhinged mind. 'Pyromaniac' is also used colloquially, however, to designate actors whose intentionality is more straightforward. One often hears accusations against unscrupulous developers, seeking to clear land on the cheap, or exacting revenge after being denied planning permission; or against shepherds, for similar reasons. There is an enduring history to such intentional firings. Slash and burn techniques were once prominent and fairly regulated in Corsica, particularly amongst shepherds keen to clear land for grazing, before they were outlawed by the French state in the 19th century (Wilson, 1988: 70ff.). As these practices faded into the realm of illegitimacy, they blurred into a broader category that included arson as part of ongoing feuds, or as localized revenge by shepherds on cultivators. When, from 1834 onwards, the French state started laying claim on a number of forests previously considered communal property, fires were also started by locals in retaliation against these encroachments (Wilson, 1988: 69). In one court case, a man was accused of starting a fire which devastated 1000 hectares of the state-owned forest of Ota in August 1848 as an act of revenge against 'the authorities, who had been trying to capture two of his cousins who were bandits' (1988: 71).

Current uses of 'pyromaniac' also point to unintentional fire-starters such as those who throw cigarette ends or smouldering matches out of car windows. Signs discouraging such behaviour have been put up along most Corsican roads, and it is often 'tourists' who are believed to be the thoughtless actors in this usually unverifiable scenario.

In these various ways, fires are emplotted within a chain of human causality and acquire a whole range of different potential personalities, depending on whether they are the result of unscrupulous intentional calculation ('shame on you who burns the earth', exclaims in Corsican, the leading Corsican nationalist website),[9] bungling idiocy by uncaring outsiders, or whether their origin escapes back into the non-human through the incomprehensible mind of the true 'pyromaniac'. But fires of course, also outflank human agency in spectacular ways – they are, to use 'ANT' terminology, 'mediators' rather than mere 'intermediaries' (Latour, 2005: 58): their input does not determine their output. The aim of the newly created research unit at the university of Corte is precisely to reduce fires to 'intermediaries', fully modelled entities whose actions can be described 'ahead of real-time'. Until this is done, however, fires will continue to have, as it were, a mind of their own. And the first thing a fire does is precisely to cover its own tracks, to destroy the clues and traces of its origin, giving rise, in the same movement, to the uncertainty and controversies outlined earlier. In doing this, the effect of the fire is to mobilize the common knowledge of locals in a search for origins, a search during the course of which this common knowledge is rehearsed, tested and reconfigured.

Watching a fire is no more straightforward than assessing its origin. From the first moment a fire is sighted, this sets off chains of mobile telephone calls, as people exchange their partial perspectives: from the four points of the compass, from the third floor of a mountain village house and the sea-level square of the nearby town, people relay their own tracking of the smoke and flames, putting together a composite image of the fire as a single entity – or rather as a single process, since the fire is never in stasis. With their own means, and in their own urgent 'real-time', concerned locals are doing the same

thing as the research unit at Corte: attempting to reduce the fire from a mediator to an intermediary. The fire as a visual entity combines multiple shifting perspectives, but it is always already more than this, potentiality and direction, vectorial projections and imaginative mappings. Which way will it turn? This depends on the wind, of course, but also on a range of other factors. As we sat in the village square, my companions discussed in detail which expanses of land in the adjoining valleys and hillsides were 'clean' – that is, where had the thick undergrowth been cleared? Those areas would slow down the fire's progress. People also wondered which firefighting planes would be sent – the small white planes which drop a red chemical dust, or the huge *canadairs* which fill up with sea-water? We discussed the fleet that was available locally, the size of the fleet at the large town of Bastia, the time it would take them to get here (which of course depended on what other closer fires they had to attend to). How many planes would the continental firefighters lend the island this summer?

And of course, the fire's progress was not a phenomenon of uniform value. The fire brought urgency to people's knowledge of the land as property: *whose* fields and terrains was the fire creeping over? Whose house, hidden from view on the other side of the hill, would fall foul of the flames if the wind turned southerly? When another fire erupted a few days later even closer to the village, I was surprised to see the two brothers who owned the butcher shop jump in their small Peugeot and follow the huge four-wheel drive fire truck as it trundled up the hill. 'They have cattle up there', a bystander said laconically. But it is not just material interest that can turn bystanders into amateur firefighters. A sheer mix of concern and excitement drove youths from the village towards the flames. When I finally got up to leave my companions on the square, one of them held out a warning finger: 'Don't go there, it's dangerous!'.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND DISTRIBUTED COGNITION

Slightly earlier, a continental French couple who had rented a flat in the village for a few weeks walked by us, got into their car and drove off. Their seeming lack of interest in the fire caused no end of muttering and adverse comment. At that moment, I recalled the equally disgusted reactions to stories of tourist *interest* in fires: some actually took photos! On the face of it, it seems that as a tourist, you're damned if you do look at a fire and damned if you don't.

The foregoing account of what is involved in watching a fire should give us some clues as to why this is the case. Watching a fire in the way described earlier is a process that is not exhausted by the usual definitions of the visual. Firstly and most obviously, it calls upon a mass of accumulated and embodied knowledge – of the wind, the three-dimensional layout of the landscape, of the human geography, the fire management infrastructures, the history of previous blazes and the kind of people (actual and imagined) whose actions feed into the blaze: those who start it, those who fight it, those who spectate. This is the kind of thing usually referred to as 'local knowledge' (e.g. Frake, 1996: 248; for Corsica, see Ravis-Girodani, 1983; Meisterheim, 1999: 9; Gailbert, 2004: 34 and 150), the sort of knowledge which cannot be subsumed in a map, which can be fed in titbits to the eager anthropologist, but often retains in anthropological accounts an almost mystical unity and 'thickness': 'The power of local knowledge helps both to identify the outsider and to give the local the advantage' (Frake, 1996: 249). The phrase rings very true. But what exactly is 'local knowledge' made of?

I would argue that local knowledge of the kind described here is distributed knowledge, in the sense in which this expression is used by Edwin Hutchins (1996; see also Lave, 1996). Like navigating an amphibious helicopter transport in Hutchins' account, watching a fire is a process that draws on knowledge which is distributed in uneven and redundant patterns across a number of different minds. That much is easy: not everyone knows everything, and watching fires *together* is partly about sharing information and learning – local knowledge and local people co-constructing each other.

But Hutchins argues further that some cognitive properties cannot be crammed into individual minds and can only be understood as properties of groups of minds in interaction with each other and with artefacts in the world (Hutchins, 1996: 62). The broader philosophical implications of this point have been spelled out in an influential article on the 'extended mind' by Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998), but an anthropological genealogy for this approach could also be traced through Alfred Gell, who famously claimed in *Art and Agency* that 'The Kula system as a whole is a *form of cognition*, which takes place outside the body, which is diffused in space and time, and which is carried on through the medium of physical indexes and transactions involving them' (Gell, 1998: 232).[10] Keeping a minute-by-minute record of the position of a ship, in Hutchins' account, requires such distributed cognitive processes, and so does keeping tabs on something as monstrously large and processual as a wild fire. Unless and until researchers at Corte manage to pack into a stable single entity – a computer program – the many simultaneous measures, processes and predictions which can reduce the fire from a fickle 'mediator' to a predictable 'intermediary', the fire will remain an open-ended matter of concern, and locals and firefighters will have to watch it and act upon it as a composite of many points of view, surmises and predictions often incommensurable and assembled ad hoc.

In this distributed process, people are helped by a range of non-human entities: mobile phones, planes, helicopters, but also fields, hills, houses. 'The terrain' can slow down the progress of the fire, but in a more basic sense, the terrain also helps you to see: whether in an emergency or in the everyday, 'knowing' a place is itself a distributed process, relying on connections between landmarks which are only marks to the knowing eye and eyes which are only knowing in the right place.

The fire is watched, fought and coerced by such assemblages of people and things, and it is against them that it fights back. The fire was a matter of concern for my companions on the square because it could hurt them, to varying degrees, in their flesh and in their fields, in their friends and in their homes, in their cattle as well as in their landscape. The fire brings home in a frighteningly immediate way the extent to which persons are themselves distributed across and invested in a range of human and non-human entities – the fire makes it obvious that they 'belong' to such entities as much as the reverse (see Edwards, 1998; Edwards and Strathern, 2000; Candea n.d.).

BEYOND DICHOTOMIES AND CONTINUA

What does the foregoing account describe if not a powerful, collective, deep, complex and enduring link between people and land? People who configure places and places that configure people, are thrown into stark relief by the blaze of a wild fire. If we had to choose between metaphorical and essential connections, this account would go towards substantiating and filling-in claims to an essential link between people and place.

Almost, but not quite. Because neither timeless essence, nor rhetorical ploys are needed here: this is in fact an account of *how essence is put together*, of how it emerges from connections which themselves are contingent and shifting.

Along with the notion of timeless essence, the spectre of radical alterity is also shooed away. For the tourists, too, are connected. No radical disjunction operates de facto between their experience of watching fires and that of the locals. As recent studies of tourist engagements with place have convincingly argued, 'the tourist gaze' is nothing like the two-dimensional objectification, which it was often reductively imagined to be (Crang, 1999; Franklin, 2003; Sheller and Urry, 2004; Larsen and Haldrup, 2006). Even at their most stereotypical, when hidden behind an SLR camera, tourists are also mobilizing complex assemblages of human and non-human entities; they too participate when they spectate.

The difference between their way of watching fires and that of my companions on the square is not therefore one of kind; as an early approximation, one might think of it as one of 'degree' (although I leave this for now as a placeholder for a more complex description which appears later in this article). However concerned tourists might be at the sight of the fire, their concern enlists a far more limited number of entities, a far smaller range of connections. The fire is a part of their world too but it belongs to it by far fewer angles, they have less of a 'handle' on it – and it has far less of a handle on them. They may deplore the ecological disaster, feel sorry for the locals, fear for their possessions; they will also try to assess the progress of the flames and to figure out where the fire is going, but they are more thinly distributed, lack associates – in the people as in the landscape – who could multiply, enhance and distribute their vision of the fire.

What the fire brings into view, in other words, are the tangibly divergent ways in which people and places are assembled and entangled. If we now return to issues of rhetoric, ideology or metaphor, these appear rather less flimsy, flat and obvious than they might have seemed to begin with. The Guide du Routard's depiction of Corsicans and Corsica as an elemental unit suddenly sounds rather less naïve. And when Jean-François Bernardini, the singer of the Corsican world music band *I Muvrini* says that 'to be Corsican is to cry when the *maquis* burns', the statement suddenly has a different ring. Indeed, one might want to temper some of the more functionalist undertones of the notion of distributed cognition, with its talk of mechanisms and operations, by exploring the affective aspects of human–nonhuman relations. What is distributed across the participants, the places, the stories, the winds and the flames, are not merely cognitive processes, but also *affects* (see Thrift, 2004; Navaro-Yashin, 2007). And yet, while we can appreciate the extent to which such associations of people and land transcend the metaphorical, we do not have to fall into a reiteration of the romantic opposition between locals who live their land and tourists who merely gaze at it.

Were we to stop here, however, we would have simply redescribed, in a needlessly sophisticated form, the fairly simple idea that 'insiders' and 'outsiders' are at opposite ends of a 'continuum'. But the case of the researchers at Corte throws a spanner in the works of this neat unilineal progression. For the researchers' own relation to the fire and to the land is different again; it mobilizes a different set of entities in a different set of connections. And while we may be tempted to fit the 'locals' and the 'tourists' into neat regionalizations (a 'Corsican' way of seeing against a 'French' or 'western' one, perhaps?) the researchers do not lend themselves to that kind of manipulation. Like the fire itself,

they explicitly deploy themselves on different scales (cf. Latour, 2005: 269). They associate themselves to regional and national bodies (including similar organizations in the USA and Scotland) which allow them to create delimited local experiments in the Corsican *maquis* based on which they produce knowledge for a global audience, to be distributed over the internet.

The position of the researchers breaks the temptation to resolve the situation into a dualism (outsider versus insider perspectives), *but also* into a continuum (more connections for insiders, fewer connections for outsiders), which is little more, after all, than a wary dualism. It is not merely a question of the *quantity* of connections, as if reality were a series of uniform dots to join, as if identity could be resolved into a numerical comparison. No, the relationship to land varies substantively according to *which* connections are made, and to what. In a context in which spectatorship is always-already participation, insiderness and outsiderness are not stable states that can be found sitting quietly at opposite ends of a continuum. Each person will find something slightly (or wildly) different as the connections accumulate. As the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde put it, 'each one of us, however orthodox he be, has his own religion, and each, however precise, his own language and ethics; the most commonplace of scientists has his own science, and the most bureaucratic of officials his own system of administration' (2000[1899]: 87).[11] Each too, has his own way of being local, his own personally acquired set of landmarks, associates, numbers stored in his mobile phone, his stakes, fears, and blindspots – which go into making him a (particular) local *person*.

DIFFERENCE OUT OF SIMILARITY, SIMILARITY OUT OF DIFFERENCE

This leaves us with a problem. How does this generative, shifting multiplicity solidify into the kind of binaries with which this article began? This is particularly hard to explain when watching fires is described as a distributed process. For as Jean Lave has pointed out, notions of distributed knowledge and cognition also suggest that:

> learning is ubiquitous in ongoing activity, although often unrecognised as such . . . It is not the case that the world consists of newcomers who drop unaccompanied into unpeopled problem spaces. People in activity are skilful at, and are more often than not engaged in, helping each other to participate in changing ways in a changing world. (Lave, 1996: 5)

If watching a fire is one of the many activities through which one can slowly and progressively become 'local' (albeit in a myriad of different ways), one of the ways one can acquire and become acquired by the manifold connections which are being mobilized, whence, then, come the instances of disjunction, opposition, boundary-making which one can observe in the square as in the stories with which I opened this article? How is shifting multiplicity resolved into categorical opposition?

Part of the answer is that researchers at Corte are not alone in manipulating scale and context: so does everyone else. And when my companions on the square manipulate scale to make themselves local, they grab the passing tourists as their non-local other. They incorporate and appropriate them, in other words, but only by one tiny facet of their person: as disconnected, oculocentric tourist. And one is unlikely to feel like helping such a figure 'to participate in changing ways in a changing world'. One is

much more likely to grumble about them and use them later as a framing device to substantiate one's own insiderness.

Gabriel Tarde argued that we belong to broader entities such as 'societies' or 'nations' only by one aspect of our person, which is why such entities are always less complex and more fragile than their constituent parts (Tarde, 1999[1895]; see also Latour, 2002). For a more detailed assessment of the power – and occasionally very problematic aspects of Tarde's sociology, see Candea (n.d.). Expanding on this insight, we might say that we belong to each others' worlds in more or less complex ways, by more or fewer aspects of our person. Another way of putting this would be to say that my companions did to the passing tourists what they were attempting to do to the fire: they reduced them from complex, unpredictable mediators, to mechanical intermediaries: fully modelled entities which hold no surprises. And at the precise moment when the tourists were turned into such a thinly-defined presence in my companions world, I would wager that the converse was equally true – the tourists were quite probably dealing with another instance of 'those unfriendly Corsicans who mutter about you as you walk through the village square' (Candea, n.d.). If they had read the Guide du Routard, they might well have concluded that they were in the presence of that unassailable hybrid entity 'Corsica', which declined to let them 'see behind the postcard'. In the meantime my companions were faced with 'typically rude and insensitive tourists'. Here difference, even radical difference, emerges out of everyone doing the same kind of thing – but doing it to each other, rather than doing it together.

CONCLUSION: MATTERS OF CONCERN

In France, the question of Corsican identity and difference from the French is an ongoing matter of concern (in the Latourian as well as the commonplace sense). Like the fire, this difference is a phenomenon which crosses established boundaries and whose properties depend on the scale upon which it deploys itself. There is a broad consensus about the existence of 'Corsican' and 'French' as categories. Debate mostly occurs over their proper definition, de jure and de facto. What kind of thing is Corsicanness? Should it be recognized and regulated by (French) law? Is it the same *kind of category* as 'Frenchness'? Are the two compatible, hierarchically ordered, mutually exclusive? Can/should Corsican culture 'change', and in what way? Can one become Corsican, and how?

The instance of fires in the Corsican countryside cuts across these debates. Some enlist fires to reinforce and clarify the distinction between Corsicans and continentals, or between 'locals' and 'tourists' – which is of course not the same thing, as many continentals who have lived on the island for years are keen to point out. For others, fires are an occasion to enlist entities across different scales, from the Corsican *maquis*, to the CNRS and the internet, into one coherent programme of research. In this article, I have enlisted the fires, some villagers of Crucetta, a few tourists and the research team at Corte to argue that as anthropologists, it would be equally unwise to dismiss land–people links as metaphors and to believe in them as timeless truths.

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Notes

1 Following official terminology, Corsica was never a colony of France, and most mainstream commentators on current Corsican issues consider the Corsican nationalists' attacks on the 'French Colonial State' to be within the realms of the metaphorical. For those who make these claims, however, it is the French State's denial of Corsica's (former/present) colonial status which is mere wordplay. The notion of metaphor, as I will argue throughout this article, is often a false friend, and this debate is a case in point: Corsica's incorporation in 1769 as a 'province' of the *ancien régime* predated the strict polarization of French territory into metropole and colony, following which Corsica fell on the metropole side. On the other hand, the continuity of government policies and concerns (especially in the 19th century) between French colonies and remote regions or lower social orders of metropolitan France has often been noted (Rabinow, 1989; Colonna, 1997), and Corsica is a particularly good example of the sliding scale of centre–periphery interactions.

2 Place names are pseudonyms, except for the large town of Bastia. For discussion of Crucetta as an 'arbitrary location', rather than a taken-for-granted 'village fieldsite' see Candea (2007).

3 Although of course, not all versions of ontological alterity, any more than all versions of cultural difference, assume a difference which centres – strategically, heuristically or otherwise – on 'a people'. This question was discussed *in extenso* in a recent revival of the *Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory* at the University of Manchester ('Ontology is just another word for culture' – GDAT 2007). I thank the organizer, Soumhya Venkatesan, my co-debaters, Michael Carrithers, Martin Holbraad and Karen Sykes, and members of the audience for many of the insights, which have been fed back into this article.

4 According to the department of the Physical Science of the Environment (SPE) based at the University of Corte. Website http://spe.univ-corse.fr/expe_feux/html/pr%E9sentation.html (accessed March 2008).

5 http://spe.univ-corse.fr/expe_feux/html/pr%E9sentation.html (accessed March 2008).

6 http://spe.univ-corse.fr/filippiweb/ (accessed 11 March 2008).

7 http://spe.univ-corse.fr/expe_feux/html/convention.html (accessed March 2008).

8 http://spe.univ-corse.fr/expe_feux/html/convention.html (accessed March 2008).

9 http://www.unita-naziunale.org/portail/u_focu_basta.htm (accessed March 2008).

10 For a rather different attempt to bring theories of distributed/extended cognition in dialogue with ethnography, see Pedersen (2007).

11 With this formulation (informed by his opposition to Durkheim's definition of the social in terms of constraint), Tarde had already pre-emptively resolved the structure/agency debate. His characters are not autonomous individual agents battling against the external structures of language, religion or scientific thought. Neither the agent nor the system exists as such, only a mass of specific variations whose association can never be more than the sum of its parts. This is another sense in which Tarde could be seen as a forefather of Actor Network Theory, 'ANT' (Latour, 2002).

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