

Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 1

Issue 1 *Special Issue: Politics and Religion in Amazonia*

Article 15

June 2003

Entangled Edens: Visions of the Amazon

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Recommended Citation

Carneiro, Robert L. (2003). "Entangled Edens: Visions of the Amazon," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 15.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol1/iss1/15>

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Entangled Edens: Visions of the Amazon. Candace Slater. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. 332 pp., chronology of key dates, glossary, notes, index. \$50.00 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper). ISBN 0-520-22641-0, ISBN 0-520-22642-9. [www.ucpress.edu]

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This book is well titled, for in its pages we find a veritable *tangle* of themes and issues, perspectives and metaphors, claims and counterclaims. It contains, the author tells us, “portrayals that collide and intertwine” (p. 186), and through these depictions the Amazon emerges as “a joint creation—a series of both conscious and unconscious collaborations” (p. 202). The collaborators Slater has in mind are of two kinds: “insiders,” the natives of the region, and “outsiders,” those who have visited the Amazon and gone home to write about it.

Candace Slater is not an anthropologist but a professor of Portuguese literature who has carried out research in Brazil for more than twenty years, the last fifteen of them on the Amazon. Her book has the appurtenances of scholarship, with no fewer than 58 pages of footnotes and 604 titles in the bibliography. Previous to this one, Slater had written a book entitled *Amazonia, Dance of the Dolphin* (1994) on which, I suspect, she drew heavily in writing parts of the present work.

It is difficult to say just what Slater’s objective was in writing *Entangled Edens*. No clear message comes through. Many voices are heard, but which one is hers? We learn the views on Amazonia of Sir Walter Raleigh, Henry Walter Bates, Theodore Roosevelt, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Euclides da Cunha, to cite only the most prominent outsiders. But Slater’s own view remains obscure, if not disguised. Most probably, her goal was to present the views of the insiders, the little people for whom the Amazon is home, views often at odds with those of outsiders. The insiders she gives voice to are mostly *remanescentes* (the descendants of runaway slaves), and *garimpeiros* (gold miners). The thoughts and feelings of native Indians get very little play. While sympathizing with the Yanomamö and other beleaguered tribes, Slater seems to feel that their plight is well enough known, and that her task is to tell the story of the *caboclos*, which is not.

Early in the book Slater introduces two metaphors—the Amazon as a “giant” and as a “shape-shifter”—that she pursues relentlessly through its pages. “[W]hen I speak of ‘giants’ in the following pages,” she tells us, “I am referring less to ... particular gigantic entities [such as huge trees] ... than to a narrative process in which one part comes to stand in for a larger whole” (p. 13). The notion of the Amazon as a shape-shifter, on the other hand, is that of a kaleidoscope, constantly turning, causing images to vary when seen by different

persons and from different angles. “The images and stories that appear and reappear here,” she says, “are clues to our own thinking, and to others’ conception of a rain forest that is both place and icon, natural creation and ongoing human invention” (p. 203).

Slater picks out certain themes—El Dorado, Amazon women, enchanted lakes, green hell—and hammers them repeatedly and unremittingly, until she has pounded them into the ground. But just when we think she has hammered them enough, she disinters them and hammers them again. Her prose luxuriates in twists and turns, arabesques and curlicues, contrasts and contradictions. Indeed, the first half of her book must be judged a hypertrophy of the literary effort.

A dozen times over she tells us that the Amazon is awe-inspiring to some but menacing to others. The first hundred pages of the book are, in fact, repetitious to the point of tedium. They irritate more than they illuminate. They could have been compressed to a third, even a quarter, of their present length to their immeasurable advantage.

Only on page 104, when Slater, on the basis of her own observations, begins to describe the dreary and dangerous life of the *garimpeiros*, do we begin to get a factual, straightforward, and informative account of things as they are. Then on page 159 she starts telling the little-known history of the runaway slaves and their modern-day descendants. With literary pretensions and devices once more set aside, we are treated to an interesting account of a resilient and engaging people. With insight and sympathy, Slater points out that while the outside world thinks of the Amazon as being the proper domain of Indian tribes, the fact is that “persons of mixed blood ... constitute the great bulk of the Amazonian population” (p. 141).

In this section we also learn that while the world looks upon the new biological reserves being established in Brazil as an unalloyed good, the mixed-blood *caboclos* who reside around them regard them very differently, believing that these reserves have shut them off from access to land they consider rightfully theirs. Here Slater observes, with a touch of irony, that while “conservation biologists speak grimly of a dying paradise in order to rally support” for these reserves, she herself regards them as “the botanical equivalent of gated communities” (p. 187).

In the end, Slater points to the long-standing—and still unresolved—issue of what to do with the Amazon. Should it be opened up to economic exploitation for the greater glory of Brazil? Should the primary concern be the conservation of the unique biological riches of the rain forest? Or should the Amazon remain the protected home of its humble inhabitants, both Indian and *caboclo*? After repeated ambiguities and hesitations, Slater appears to come down on the side of the third alternative. “An awareness of this give-and-take,” she argues, “can help bring into focus the real people on whose daily lives real policies impinge” (p. 189).