BOOK REVIEWS

Roberts, Les 2020 (2018). *Spatial Anthropology: Excursions in Liminal Space*. London: Rowman & Littlefield. 318 p. ISBN: 9781786606372 (hardback); ISBN: 9781786615978 (paperback); ISBN: 9781786606389 (E-book).

Despite the book's title, readers seeking a concise definition or easy-to-operationalise perspective on spatial anthropology will be disappointed. It is less an exercise in what readers of this journal would recognise as anthropology than a meandering exploration of the subject matter of its subtitle, liminal space. Roberts' book is in fact a contribution to a growing conversation in transdisciplinary humanities research around space, place, land, and cultural memory. This debate is undoubtedly relevant to the social sciences, but some strands of it, including what is represented here, are also controversial.

The task of understanding space at the human level and at small scales is undoubtedly urgent, with earth systems, economic institutions, and mobility practices presenting themselves as existential crises of global scope but resolutely unfolding as local events of the kind that anthropologists study. Against this contemporary background, work like this is not politically light-weight, but neither are its implications or stakes clear. On the other hand, for anyone interested in drained wetlands or historic cinemas of the North West of England, or detailed discussion of how musical memories of road trips might humanise a non-place, there is much of interest here. Roberts' prose contains many beautiful sentences that encapsulate aspects of life and research in 'the delirious clamour of restless (and oil-fuelled) hyper-mobility' (p. 251). Yet as an introduction to, let alone a road-map for, making sense of space, liminal or other, the book is too demanding, or too meandering. It moves too fast, perhaps little like the super-modern life it discusses. Ironically, this sometimes goes against the grain of the book, which highlights the very idea (or hope) of space as anthropological in the sense of humanly lived.

The material for the book has, as Roberts writes, numerous sources. It is rather militant about its geographical situatedness in and around Liverpool, having a particular interest in the area's wetlands and their history. In this respect too, Roberts pursues an eclectic approach, mixing accounts of medieval monks with contemporary oil refining. Fortunately, the discussion of how eighteenth-century engineering drained not just water but social life from the area is fascinating and deftly composed (at least for readers like this one who delight in deconstructing Britain's recent political histories). However, readers who are not familiar with the history of Britain, not to mention the cultural studies and digital humanities work of recent decades, will have a hard time with it.

The often impressionistic and fleeting discussions cover a variety of spatial experiences and ways of thinking and writing about space, with Roberts invoking a startling range and number of thinkers to accompany him. He reworks analogies between way-finding and thinking, but the sources he uses are so

wide—indeed eclectic—that a careful reader is bound to find something new in them. The book features endless tributaries, in terms of intellectual inspiration and landscapes described, and it displays a penchant for tangents and sub-sub-clauses. These are all so noticeable that I am not sure the author's stated aim to push spatial humanities from a discursive to a practical exercise succeeds. The bibliography leans on Lefebvre, Debord and Augé while the book itself offers many a walk-through of mostly English literary and popular culture references. Methodologically Roberts can be very adventurous, with one of the more memorable chapters based on doing research within a motorway traffic island. Elsewhere, some of the reporting of research that he draws on, his own and others', is simultaneously both detailed and anecdotal, making for text that feels easy—and tempting—to skim.

Writing this at the start of the academic year 2020–2021, it remains to be seen what mark will be left in scholarship by the political struggles over colonial pasts and definitions of cosmopolitanism unfolding right now, and it is unfair to jump on any bandwagons on this point. Interestingly, Roberts gets the term spatial anthropology from the Japanese architectural historian Jinnai Hidenobu, and Chapter 1 is an absorbing if challenging exploration of this 'odd-sounding' phrase (apparently Hidenobu's own take), which somehow puts a relation of equivalence between space and anthropology (space = anthropology). Such cosmopolitanism and indeed imaginative theorizing is not sustained beyond the first chapter, however. This goes together, I think, with the text being content (as it were) to be an expression (or enactment) of a personal inclination. Possibly arising from this, the philosophical underpinnings of the work are recognizably, perhaps even straightforwardly, western and Eurocentric. This is not to criticize or praise, simply to note that the book's preoccupations are familiar from sociological and urban research and the industrial situations that gave rise to the social sciences in the first place. Roberts' academic affiliation is cultural studies, although his original university formation was anthropological. The spatial anthropology of the book is not therefore the discipline-busting, world-embracing and world-making endeavour that some anthropologists and geographers have recently embarked upon, but squarely European in its ambition. Given that for Roberts the point was to be militantly situated, this is a valid approach.

At another level *Spatial Anthropology: Excursions in Liminal Space* could be read as an effort to broaden and deepen the study of human experiences of space, or indeed, spatial anthropology: less as a discipline, more as a provocation to the very idea of discipline. Roberts' passionate and not at all straightforward call to do research that challenges academia (in its traditional and corporate varieties) is reminiscent of Tim Ingold's later work, traces of whose thinking are palpable in the book. And just like Ingold has a tendency to do, *Spatial Anthropology* flouts its wide scope and avoids pretence at objectivity. However, it also indulges the author's subjective discomfort with discipline and objectivity—to the reader's cost.

Readers will have to decide whether or not they are happy to be taken on 263-page 'exploratory rambles' to play with 'ways of thinking that may be impressionistic, perhaps a little meaningless, but for all their poetic imprecision (…) speak powerfully of the creative dynamism of space, of its playful resilience, its pliability' (p. 262). The book, originally published in 2018 in hardback, came out in

paperback in 2020, so one can only assume that there is indeed a readership for this kind of spatial humanities.

Despite my own long-term engagement with a variety of styles and discourses that problematise or seek to make sense of space in human experience, and despite a deep knowledge of England, I found it hard work. That being said, its almost compendium-like scope and professionally compiled index will likely make it something to return to later.

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