Enlivening Cultural Geography

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Surfacing it all.

Each time I listen to *Daydream Nation* something is transferred, a pot boils over spilling sounds that will stick to various surfaces, some emotional stuff is recycled in a very special way. That is to say that feeling and perception are translated into spatial terms, reclaiming euphoria and surfacing reality [...] streams of noise loaded with feelings which had previously been impossible to express.

Jutta Koether (1988)

Introduction

The above description, appended to Sonic Youth’s eponymous 1988 album *Daydream Nation*, captures something of the enigmatic quality of music. But only something. So much of the experience of listening, singing, dancing and emotionally connecting with melody is beyond words. Explaining how music pulls us out of our thoughts, unconsciously makes our bodies move in syncopated rhythm, and enlivens our sensations would be difficult to comprehend to someone who has not experienced the pulse of a bass note throbbing through the corporeal fibre of their being. However much effort we might put into explaining this feeling, even with the use of familiar research tools such as photographs, interviews and rich description the account would inevitably fall short. Far better you might think to simply download the tracks or take that person to a gig. And you’d be right. But this does not mean that we cannot work imaginatively within spaces arising between performance and representation as a number of geographers are now beginning to do.

This paper begins by exploring how a ‘crisis of representation’ is leading non-representational theorists, affectual writers and performative scholars to experiment and break apart the familiar representational mould cast around cultural geography. Although such manoeuvres are not new, and have been widely debated amongst ethnographers, philosophers and anthropologists, it is how and why this turn to performance is taking place within cultural geography that is the focus. The paper explores new methodological approaches used to unsettle and ‘shake up’ some of the more conventional social scientific research methods familiar to the discipline. These new cultural geography approaches are concerned with the busyness of life, focusing less upon what people say, and more upon what they do. With careful handling it is suggested that the transient, ephemeral and affective dimensions of everyday interactions can be used to enrich fieldwork reports and geographical accounts. Using examples from recent scholarship on landscape the paper goes on to explore how non-representational theories hold the potential for recomposing these sites in ways that can enliven cultural geography. Through these illustrations we can see how the engagement with performance, practice and the vitality of our earthly surroundings has ushered in more adventurous theories to engage with a living world in motion.

Despite these valuable openings the paper critically reflects upon the current turn to practice by considering what I call the *problematic of performance*. It is argued that
while work in this vein allows us to experiment with new forms of doing, it is important to consider the use and limitations of these ways of working if we are to develop more sophisticated repertoires of interpretation. In this final section I focus upon the inability of work on affect and non-representational theory to wholly invite geographical practitioners from other sub-areas, and transform the teaching curricula in any meaningful way as the preceding ‘cultural turn’ has done. The originality of approaches to feeling, affect and the body are further questioned and claims that the work is inherently political are placed under scrutiny. It is argued that an underlying universalism permeates various affectual accounts where experience and the body are positioned from a white, middle-class, masculinist perspective making this area ripe for feminist and postcolonial critique. It is also suggested that not enough attention has been paid to the different scales at which affectual geographers choose to work and the implications this has for cultural geography more broadly. The paper ends by considering the problem of representation itself and its tendency to be disavowed in the accounts of most non-representational theorists. Here I conclude that rather than expel representation from the terrain of cultural geography there remain creative possibilities for reworking the spaces and gaps that lie between and within re/presentation.

…A Crisis of Representation?

The cultural turn in human geography with its reliance upon discourse, text and representation stands accused of bypassing the ‘immediacy of the now’ (Thrift, 2003:2020). The privileging of discursive approaches has led some geographers to articulate how ‘that which is close up – the habitual and largely unreflective bodily practices by which we go on – is not being given adequate consideration’ (Conradson, 2003:1984). Such remarks reflect a growing concern that we have become ‘prisoners of language’ and that representation, by its very nature, always falls short. Put simply, ‘The world is more excessive than we can theorise’ (Dewsbury, et al. 2002:437). So how do we engage with this excess to elicit accounts that are ‘extra-discursive’?

All too often words barely do justice to the immediacy of events and offer at best a vapid translation of thick bodily encounter. If we were to try to capture the immaterial sensations of music through the written word, we would soon discover that much worldly experience is simply ‘felt’. It is this flawed attempt to convey the vitality of ‘clubbing’ that leaves Ben Malbon suitably defeated by the limits of language. In what was to become a pulsating account of the clubbing experience Malbon (1999) initially appears deflated by the task at hand:

How can words – simple, linear words on a page – evoke this delirious maelstrom of movement and elation? Again and again I arrive at this point […] I simply cannot describe it any further (1999 xii-xiii).

As Malbon goes on to admit, ‘Words fail me; words become redundant and unnecessary, words become pointless’ (ibid.). The impossibility of words – or at least Malbon’s – to ever fully capture feeling and emotion leads us to suggest that much human experience is impenetrable to culture. Of course, as Derrida (1997) reminds us
language inherently corresponds in a ‘lack’ and debates about representation have
long abounded in philosophic work and anthropologies deploying ethnography. But
this does not mean that words are pointless as Malbon initially felt, or that more
words are needed to better convey the feelings we can’t express (see Harrison, 2007).
Rather it alerts us to what might happen when the malleable clay of experience is
made ceramic in the fire of meaning. As work on the emotional geographies of music
and the soundscapes elicited reveal, the affective qualities of musical performance are
not reducible to conscious production and understanding (Smith, 1997). In the
immediacy of performance these affects erupt, spill over, rupture and disturb what is
already thought to exist (Anderson, 2006).

Words it seems are never enough. As Latham and Conradson (2003:1901) declare
much human geography is ‘Domated by an obsession with the politics of
representation’, privileging it over feeling and practice. A powerful sense in these
writings that representation seeks to fix, stabilise and capture the meaning of social
life in a way that ‘renders inert all that ought to be most lively’ (Lorimer, 2005). In
these sparse depictions there is a tendency towards logic, linearity and what might be
termed, lifeless flat representation. In an attempt to reckon with everyday practices
and the intangible sensations of lived experience Nigel Thrift has proffered the term
‘non-representational theory’ to describe the eclectic ways in which we can move
beyond representational orthodoxy.

On the surface this may appear to leave cultural geography with its pronounced focus
upon representation in something of a cul-de-sac. However, I would suggest that
representation does not have to diminish performance. The vibrant endeavours of
numerous poets, musicians, film-makers; photographers and novelists reveal lively
acts of cultural production. Similarly the inability to express the sheer push of life in
geographical writing does not have to result in the pursuit of a leaden, parsimonious
account. As an ethnographer I often find that the tone in which something is said, a
fleeting gesture, or look can entirely reorder the meaning of the prose delivered. In
these telling moments the astounding power of silence can be of the utmost
importance, yet only rarely do these mundane events ever find their way into the final
write-up of our research accounts. As Paul Harrison (2007) has shown much is
revealed in broken words, when language falls short or when we are overwhelmed by
the emotion of love, grief, respect, hope or jealousy.

As a counter to this fetishization of the word the sociologist Les Back (2007)
encourages researchers to ‘listen with the eye’. In a moving testimony on the role of
tattoos in working-class culture Back’s evocative phrase is an attempt to go beyond
words – what is simply said – and invites us to become attuned in the wider art of
listening and the humble act of learning. For the middle-class observer the tattoo may
be silently read as a symbol of working-class vulgarity, a signifier of marked
difference. Yet Back discovers that many of the tattoos that adorned participants were
imbued with deep emotional content, commemorating feelings that cannot be
expressed in words as a form of a personal biography, literally written on the body.
Listening to others in this ‘fleshed out’ fashion reminds us that it is often what is not
said that is most personal and precious.

Where Thrift and other non-representational theorists have on occasion sought to
bypass representation I would suggest that words, paintings, images, or for that matter
tattoos, have a material and performative dimension to them. This would suggest that we should not write out their ‘brute object-ness’ (Latham and Conradson, 2009: 253) in the quest for meaning or ignore the way in which their emotional content can spring to life and inspire feelings, affects and practices. As Dewsbury et. al. (2002) suggest representations are alert rather than inert tropes, acting as manifestations and ‘doings’ of a particular kind.

In this sense representation is perhaps more usefully thought of as incessant presentation, continually assembling and disassembling, timing and spacing; worlding (p.438).

The material and performative doing of representation was markedly apparent following the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York on September 11th 2001. The now familiar high-residue image of a second aeroplane crashing into the Twin Towers was consistently replayed on television screens and print media as it was transmitted worldwide through global communication technologies. At a representational level the symbolic aspects of the destruction of the Twin Towers as falling phallic totems of Western global capital is certainly ripe for critical textual deconstruction. But if we consider such imagery not as ‘dead text’ awaiting our interpretation, but as lively presentation we can also reveal its performative aspects.

The images serve to inform us of the global significance of this moment and, for many audiences far removed from New York City, these citations have even become the ‘event’. This argument is developed in the provocative writings of the postmodernist theorist Jean Baudrillard (1996) commenting upon the ‘death of the social’ and the way in which reality becomes disposable as it is emptied out of meaning in the mediated move to a ‘hyper-reality’ of endless signs, consumer objects and artifice.

The images and iconography of 9/11 – the US ordering of the timeline serving only to emphasize its global centrality – appears to have taken on a life of its own, generating fear, anxiety, loss and mourning. As Latham and McCormack (2009:253) affirm, ‘images can be understood as resonant blocks of space-time: they have duration, even if they appear still’. I would contend that there is still much to be done in actively working the space between re/presentation so as not write out the connections between performativity and power. The performance of moving and still imagery can be seen in the affects generated around global insecurity when Western nation-states respond to perceived threats of terrorism. At a material level the response has seen the introduction of new objects of surveillance for international air travel, such as finger-printing technologies, camera retina recognition machinery and impending body-scanning devices. Regarding representations as activities or ‘doings’ in this way enables us to understand how they operate through an affective register that can give rise to a new political geography marked out in time and space. Through such enactments representations also become events of a particular kind that may transform feeling into material objects in our daily environment.

Performing Methodologies…
In light of this discussion we might consider non-representational theory not so much as the obliteration of representation, but rather a new means of taking representation seriously. Rather than advocating a theory of anti-representation – the non-representation originally proposed by Thrift – it can be characterised more by ‘a firm belief in the actuality of representation’ (Dewsbury et al 2002: 438). In particular Hayden Lorimer’s (2005) preference to speak of ‘more-than-representational’ geographies appears a thoroughly useful term that might better explain how representation and non-representation fold into one another. This can be seen where a number of studies concerned with feelings, affect and the non-representational remain bound to certain representational forms – the use of interviews, diaries, participant observation, ethnography and photographs. Each of these techniques offer a literal ‘re-presentation’ of worldly experience, the translation of activity into discourse.

Although some geographers have tried to experiment with performative styles of research and writing (McCormack, 2002) much human geography remains methodologically conventional. Moving away from the journalistic, now standardized human geography ‘interview as evidence’ approach, may encourage us to think differently. As Latham (2003) has shown through the interview-diary method, familiar qualitative techniques can still be used to enhance the liveliness of our accounts. He suggests that even established research methods can be ‘made to dance a little’ (p.2000), recognising place as a creation in process. Examples of this can be seen in experimental fieldwork conducted in the city of Berlin where British geography students consciously disrupted the rhythm and flow of everyday life by standing still in the busy stairwell of a railway underpass and filming the ensuing encounters (see Latham and McCormack, 2009).

A more embodied methodological intervention is found in a corporeal account of White Crane Silat, a Chinese martial art self-defence technique. Here the anthropologist Jaida Kim Samudra (2008) twists the familiar ethnographic term ‘thick description’ to discuss what he calls, ‘thick participation’. He suggests that rather than fall back upon a distant observation of events the act of encoding kinesthetic details, describing new sensations, and narrating physical training episodes can provide more lively anthropologies of action. Samudra does not wish to displace representation but as a co-participant in White Crane Silat to find other ways of grasping bodily movement, muscle memory and the corporeal ways in which a trained body might work. In grasping the playful potential of non-representations cultural geographers may seek to bring-to-life embodied sensations, sights, sounds, smells and tastes that make up much of our visceral experience. In this way ‘practice, presentations, operations become more central than re-presentations’ (Soderstrom, 2000:13).

The extra-discursive approaches can then be deployed as a theoretical and methodological device, prising open the excessive nature of the world as active, sensual, embodied. They allow us to interpret the world through the body in a tactile conjoining of self and other. Through these enactments we might come to understand not only subjectivity but also the world as very much in-the-making, an accumulation of processes and on-going performances. What is exciting I think about this enlivened cultural geography is its openness to the unpredictable and unknown. As Massumi explains:
If there were no escape, no excess or remainder, no fade-out to infinity, the universe would be without potential, pure entropy, death. Actually existing, structured things live in and through that which escapes them (2002:35).

Instead of ruminating on a crisis of representation non-representational practitioners delight in the infinite potential, mystery and excess of the cosmos. Bare life it seems always exceeds.

Where non-representational theorists celebrate the liveliness of that which defies or pulls apart the mode of representation, I will to show how working in the gaps, spaces and holes within representation has potential for better appreciating the power-laden ‘politics of representation’ (Hall,1997) and how this may connect with feeling and emotion. Even so, as I shall discuss when I explore the problematic of performance such actions do not necessarily sit outside of the ‘social’. In this sense non-representation does not so much signal the end of representation, as offer openings for a new beginning. Such immanent becomings are, after all, integral to our more general going about in the world. To explore some of these openings I turn now to recent cultural geography work on landscape and place that hold the potential to figure these spaces differently. Here, I focus upon the ways in which everyday spaces may be brought to life and ordered differently through haptic encounters and bodily sensations.

…Enlivening Landscape and Place

In geography the very term landscape is weighted down with formidable traditions and accompanying disciplinary baggage. As Cresswell (2003:269) argues a problem with the term is, ‘It is too much about the already accomplished and not enough about the processes of everyday life’. His point is that purely symbolic and textual readings of landscape familiar to the cultural turn (see Cosgrove and Jackson 1987; Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988; Duncan, 1990; Barnes and Duncan, 1992) have led to the ‘obliteration of practice’. If this was the case, I shall argue, it is no longer so.

A key intervention of non-representational approaches has been to implode familiar understandings of landscape as text. In contrast to representational approaches which gave primacy to signs, symbols and images, the new performative accounts turn to embodied experience, practice and doing. Where the former are seen to stabilise meaning, (occasionally) draining people and places of life, non-representational accounts have the potential (not always realised) to usher in affective ways of emotionally engaging with landscape. For Thrift (2004:82) this entails ‘inventing new relations between thought and life’, in order to create a space for other things to happen. These performative modes of address then offer a means to reinvigorate landscape by breathing life and vitality into what had once appeared ‘dead space’. Buoyed by Thrift’s declaration that the ‘world is not a reflection but a continuous composition’ (2003:2021), we can now trace a new sensibility that appreciates landscape as in process, a moment of becoming. Here landscape is no longer set apart as an object which human subjects might encounter and inscribe with meaning, but instead comes to form a fertile part of our earthly existence that may be formative of ‘hybrid geographies’ (Whatmore, 2002). In these performative readings human actors
are not privileged above objects and the natural environment but are seen to exist as part of a living cosmos that connects us to trees, soil, grass, sheep, wind, insects and rivers (MacPherson, 2008; Wylie, 2002). In this way landscapes can be seen as living rather than ‘dead matter’ in a performative turn that gives agency to ‘still life’.

This performative engagement is shown where John Wylie (2002) considers the experience of ascent and elevation up Glastonbury Tor, in Somerset, south-west England. Wylie’s argument is that it is impossible to separate out ‘self’ from ‘landscape’ to form a disembodied vision of the Tor. It is only through the act of elevation and its accompanying bodily practices that the enchantment of hill walking can be felt and understood. The experience of hill walking is a thoroughly embodied matter from the pastoral dapple of sunlight that lifts our mood, warms our body, narrows our pupils and tans our skin. In the act of ascent we may encounter gut-wrenching vertigo, the beauty of a vista, aching limbs, the mild sting of midges, or the sonorous chirrup of birdsong. The sensual aspects of these interactions appear in Hannah Macpherson’s (2008) study of blind and visually impaired walkers in the English countryside, revealing that sight is only one of the senses through which we interpret the outside world. For Crouch (2003) the physical way in which we interact with the environment, breathing, walking, running, climbing, crawling, or swimming is a means of ‘grounding performance’ as demonstrated in his work with caravan campers and allotment holders who each spoke of the earthly pleasure of ‘getting away from it all’. I would contend that such embodied accounts offer a means to transcend the ocular grammar of representation that give primacy to the visual. However they do not fully escape the discursive, a point I shall interrogate further in addressing the problematic of performance.

This vitalist approach to landscape is not restricted to the rural scenic outdoors. Steven John Saville’s (2008) energetic account of the free-running practice known as parkour reveals the transformative power this can have upon urban space. He and other practitioners known as traceurs constantly refigure the built environment by opening it out towards new hitherto unimagined, if not always attainable, mobilities. In this way Saville explores how benches, pavements, ledges, trees, walls and lampposts become charged through the practice of parkour where acrobatic engagements give seemingly inanimate objects a new ‘feel’. Following actor-network theory the place of actors and objects can be rethought as a constellation of actants gives way to new assemblages.

Here we can make a distinction between places and landscapes as simply social constructs. In Saville’s tactile engagement with parkour seemingly dead matter and architectural features come alive as new mobile possibilities unfold through performance. This ‘more-than-social’ approach is encapsulated when Saville remarks how, ‘Parkour is full of events, where the world expands and shakes with intensity’ (2008:905). A similar comparison can be made with the dynamism of skateboarding in which everyday objects are given new life as the architecture of the city is reworked through the kinetic connections between bodies, boards and wheels (Borden, 2001). Skateboarders, break-dancers, free-runners, or BMX stunt-riders through training and repetitive practice extend their bodily capacities and expand their kinaesthetic knowledge of the built environment. In so doing they draw our attention to the plasticity of place, ‘stretching out’ everyday material objects beyond their
intended use-value to make solid objects come alive in an unplanned potentiality of becoming.

The performative turn is not the sole preserve of spectacular youth practitioners. It can be traced in mundane events, encounters and happenings. Such moments include passing encounters in cafés and burger bars (Laurier and Philo, 2006; Latham, 2003), boisterous commodity exchanges in farmers’ markets (Slocum, 2007; 2008), bodily comportment on trains (Bissell, 2007), hedonistic partying on beaches (Saldanha, 2007), communal meals in welfare drop-in centres (Conradson, 2003), experimental forms of rhythm, dance and movement (McCormack, 2002; Latham and McCormack, 2009), explorations of homeless spaces in the city (Cloke et al, 2008), or moments of solitude in caravan sites and garden allotments (Crouch, 2003). These studies puncture the idea of ‘the city as text’ (Duncan, 1990) by focusing upon the lively performances that bring these spaces to life in the hustle and bustle of the everyday. They remind us that places are comprised of energy, affect and emotion. Thus, Laurier and Philo (2006) reflect how unexpected encounters in cafes may engender transient connections to emerge and dissipate in the routines of daily life. The enjoined performances that momentarily fuse together to comprise ‘café culture’ suggest that these event-spaces are a collective accomplishment of a creative kind. However, the sociality expressed by Latham (2003) and Laurier and Philo (2006) is inevitably underwritten with relations of power, an issue we shall return to when we examine the problematic of practice. In this way we might consider the types of mobile cosmopolitan consumers that are welcomed into café culture and those that are excluded or relegated to the margins – the homeless, hobos, particular youth subcultures and seemingly ‘undesirable’ sections of the working-class. A more political working of affect can be seen when Paul Gilroy (2004) remarks upon the importance of conviviality to the everyday practice of multiculturalism and civic engagement.

White lines of exclusion are apparent in Rachel Slocum’s (2008) corporeal account of encounter and exchange in the Minneapolis Farmers’ Market which on the surface appears an alternative to the ‘hyper-commodified, sanitized and segregated public spaces’ (p.850) associated with US supermarket chains. Through a performative approach, Slocum finds that racialized divisions are constantly forming and reforming around different spaces, commodities and vendors where elite forms of whiteness are secured in the act of consumption (see also Jackson, 1998). The touristic experience of interpreting the landscape through the gut is a corporeal enactment of ‘eating the Other’ (hooks,1992): a palatable means of consuming difference and feeling good about oneself without really altering the dynamics of race politics. A similar charge could be laid at the door of the contemporary dance movement as Arun Saldanha recounts in his provocative ethnography of racialized encounters on the Goan Trance scene. Saldanha explores how Goan beach parties form a space for the coming-into-being of race as it is assembled through noise, incense, dust, drugs, dance, hippie freaks, alcohol, touristic t-shirts, motorcycles and psychedelic sonic soundscapes. It is through these intersubjective relations between human and non-human agents and actors that ‘Goan Trance event’ is summoned-to-life. However, the fluorescent day-glow performance of Trance does not yield a new global community. According to Saldanha, it comes to form a ‘micro-fascist space’ where whites can ‘freak out’ and local villagers and Indian tourists are once again de-centred from the main spectacle, cast adrift in the hot sands of empire.
The Problematic of Performance…

So far we have seen how performance can offer new ways of doing cultural geography when it comes to theory, method and familiar concepts such as place and landscape. Such accounts seek to understand the world as living motion and open out possibilities for sensual geographic practices. Despite the welcome injection of liveliness into non-representational accounts I wish to address the problematic of performance and gesture towards some criticisms, concerns and contradictions that can be identified in at least some of the recent cultural geography work in this field. My desire is not to banish non-representational modes of enquiry from cultural geography but to draw attention to some of the difficulties that arise in a splitting of re/presentation. By looking closely at the gap that emerges between representation and presentation, and subjecting it to critical scrutiny, I argue that an engagement with politics of representation is still a necessary conduit for enlivening cultural geography.

At present a cluster of cultural geographers are keen to celebrate the potential of performance and its possibilities for reaching beyond the representational mould. Popke’s recent assessment that human geography is currently ‘abuzz with passion, performance and affect, infused with a sense of playfulness and a spirit of optimism and experimentation’ (2009:81) appears slightly exaggerated. In January 2009 I attended the RGS-sponsored Social and Cultural Geography conference held in Brighton. This was an enjoyable and fascinating event, from which I learned a lot. Yet one could not fail to be struck by the way non-representational theorists struggled to form meaningful dialogue with those less familiar with these approaches. Up until now these ideas have remained largely the preserve of a select band of cultural geographers and these theories have travelled little into the mainstream undergraduate curriculum (though see Latham and McCormack, 2009). This raises issues about the usefulness of these ideas if they continue to remain a purely philosophic exercise. In contrast the cultural turn that preceded this work remains an abiding influential and enduring presence in parts of social/cultural, economic and political geography.

A second concern relates to the originality of performance and the non-representational move to auras, feeling and sensation. Many of these ideas emerge out of the phenomenological insights associated with humanistic geographers who show how unconscious feelings, affects, tones and emotions shape our connections to particular landscapes generating a felt ‘sense of place’ (Ley, 1974; others). As Pain (2009) has recently demonstrated, the feminist engagement with the body, performance and emotional geographies has been largely neglected within affectual and non-representational geographies yet as Steve Pile reminds us, ‘If humanistic geography offers a means to describe people’s rich experiences of place and emotions then feminist geographers politicised it’ (2010:7).

The political inflections seen in feminist research can also be found in critical studies of race that have worked with the complex psychic processes of colonial existence – fear, desire, projection, splitting, mimicry, fetish, ambivalence – and the ways in which these feelings circulate and give substance to the creation of ‘race objects’ (see Fanon, 1970[1952]; Ellison, 1952; Bhabha, 1990). Similarly, a number of biographical studies on working-class histories have eloquently exposed the
emotional politics of class and the ‘structures of feeling’ that give rise to a sense of community and belonging (Williams, 1973; Hoggart, 1966; Young and Willmott, 1980; Steedman, 1986; Kuhn, 1995; Author, 2003). This body of work fruitfully explores the psycho-social production of subjectivity and the complex relations of power that remain overlooked in many writings on affect. Such work is rooted in a politics of representation that recognizes discourse as just one of many possible expressive practices.

A third and frequent charge aimed at work on performance is its alleged neglect of power and politics. While non-representational advocates do address the political value of being open to change and doing politics differently (see Thrift, 2001, 2003, 2004; Popke, 2009), we might question how these ideas can be put into practice in grounded and meaningful ways? Clive Barnett (2008) points to an ontological ‘blind-spot’ in which affects generated by the media are seen as manipulative and ascribed political significance, yet human subjects are often treated as cultural dupes unable to transcend or critically respond to these transmissions. As this paper weaves between the gap of re/presentation the question of whether work on performance is political, and if so how, is worthy of deeper interrogation.

In his voluminous essays Thrift (2003) riles against those who regard his ideas as little more than fluffy academic distraction. Although he declares that performance theory ‘wants to make things more political, much more political’ (original emphasis) and in by doing so, ‘expand the existing pools of alternative and corresponding forms of dissent’ (p.2021), there is scant demonstration of this. Indeed there is a slightly desperate air in some non-representational writing to claim the political worth of this work in order to secure its legitimacy. Interestingly being ‘political’ is equated with anarchic ‘dissent’ and left-wing radicalism. In contrast to Thrift who claims performance as ‘more political’ (and presumably left-wing), and critics who dismiss the work as ‘apolitical’ (and presumably conservative) it may be more productive to try to uncouple this binary. Instead I would argue that theories of performance have as much to say about the exercise of power as they do resistance (Author and Co-author, 2006). For this reason we might rephrase Thrift’s quote above to state that performativity is no more, or no less political, than routine practices of representation. In other words, it is how geographers and others enact performance theory and affect in their accounts that is politically significant, not the theory itself and the moral values ascribed to it.

A fourth troubling issue is the way in which work on affect, auras, feelings and sensations is guided by a universalism premised upon Western masculinist ideals and experiences; a criticism of humanistic geography and phenomenology more generally. Deborah Thien (2005) suggests Thrift’s (2004:58) ardent desire to affirm that his work on performance and affect is not ‘nice and cuddly’ or ‘touchy-feely’, is reflective of a universal masculine mode of ordering (see also Pain, 2009). Thrift’s determination to assert non-representational theory as ‘more political’ and his favoured use of engineering cabling metaphors may hint at some masculine anxieties here for the work to be taken seriously as ‘hard science’. For both Thien (2005) and Pain (2009) the turn to non-representational theories of affect may ironically be at the expense of emotion. For feminist writers the distinction between affect and emotion currently being articulated in human geography reworks a familiar respective gender
binary of masculine/feminine. Emotional experiences as richly developed in feminist studies are ‘emptied out’ of meaning in the masculine pursuit for dense theory and explanation. Thus, Thrift (2004:60) regards affect as a ‘kind of intelligence’ that needs to be ‘understood as a form of thinking’. In Thien’s eyes, “‘Affect’ as a term and a concept is employed here in masculinist, technocratic and distancing ways’ (2005:452). A productive way forward is offered by Pile (2010) who suggests that psychoanalytic approaches can transcend at least some of these dualisms by engaging with emotions in theory and practice.

Although Thien’s perspective is challenged by some non-representational enthusiasts (see Anderson and Harrison, 2006) the issue of universalism has not fully dissipated. The feminist critique of universalism is exemplified in Catherine Nash’s (2000) meticulous interrogation of dance. Where dance has been a frequent visitor in non-representational accounts of pre-cognitive performance, Nash emphasises the durability of the past and its formative representations that shape the practice. In a critique of the performative powers of dance as advanced by Thrift, Nash reminds us of the different culturally-situated configurations of power and the past colonial histories that equate racialized bodies with ‘natural rhythm’. Rather than operate with a universal notion of dance as a liberatory, un-thought-out, pre-cognitive experience as encapsulated by non-representational theory, Nash draws attention to ‘the ways in which different material bodies are expected to do gender, class, race and ethnicity differently’ (Nash, 2000:657). For Nash, the metaphor of choreography is more appropriate than any free-floating notion of dance as it is suggestive of intersections with power and how ‘gendered and racialized bodily practices are learnt, performed and subverted’ (ibid.).

While non-representational theory invites us to ‘live in the moment’ it is vital to remember that the past may rupture and burst through into the present. In this way Nash – herself a former dancer – regards dancing as a poor example of the pre-discursive and non-cognitive practices Thrift alludes to, recognising it works much better for exploring the ‘doing’ of identity. The challenge is that experience is treated universally with little acknowledgement of the unequal distribution of power that enables some bodies to move freely while others are marked and held in place by past histories and geographies. Divya Tolia-Kelly (2006b) further reflects how such accounts of emotion and affect, through their universalism, may invoke a type of ‘ethnocentric encounter’ by ignoring ‘the political fact of different bodies having different affective capacities’ (2006:213), a theme incisively illustrated in the racially-marked empirical accounts described previously (Saldanha, 2007; Slocum, 2008).

The way in which universal ascriptions of feeling and emotion are managed has implications for the ontology of affect. In a study of voluntary welfare services for the homeless, Conradson (2003) remarks how lingering feelings of sociality generated during a meal hang in the air long after guests have eaten and left, later claiming how ‘elements of its affective aura, bodily sensed and yet somehow woven into the physical spaces seemed to persist’ (p.1980). A problem with such assertions is that they rest upon the feelings (and imagination?) of the researcher concerned. Would uninformed investigators be similarly sensitive to these ‘atmospheres’, might we pick up on different feelings, did all homeless people experience this sensation similarly, or is this a projection of emotion by geographers onto what is already known to have gone before? In other words the social experience of previous hospitality may create
a feeling of sociality in the mind of the researcher that has little to do with the prevailing atmosphere. This does little more than reify affect. We may also note the undergirding universalist presentation of these feelings, auras and affects in ways that simply declare, ‘this is like it is’. While some might question the very existence of these auras altogether and how exactly they ‘persist’, we are also confronted with a notion of ‘affect as the pure non-representational object: it cannot be known, grasped or made intelligible’ (Pile, 2010:16-17). Yet, as Pile’s keen-eyed critique reveals, affectual geographers then penetrate the enigma they advance by disclosing these affects as ‘sociality’, ‘hope’ or ‘fear’ (see Conradson, 2003; Anderson, 2003).

A fifth problematic I wish to address concerns the scale and focus of enquiry. The majority of studies using theories of performance focus almost obsessively with the minutia of life. While this has offered important insights into the habits, routines and practices of our daily going about, it has also yielded a random, eclectic proliferation of studies on caravanning, dancing, walking, séances, allotments, cycling, boredom and even a recent attempt at ‘questioning tea-spoons’ (Latham and McCormack, 2009:254). In short, what appears to have rendered forth is something akin to ‘a geography of small things’. This may seem an overbearing criticism and it is certainly not my intention to dismiss the vitality of micro-accounts nor place the everyday under erasure. Instead, what is apparent is that when non-representational advocates try to ‘scale up’ their accounts to discuss say, the affectual nature of cities (Thrift, 2004), some of the subtlety and contingency of performance and practice found in closely-worked empirical accounts seems to dissolve into the ether of abstract generalisation. A challenge for non-representational practitioners then, is to think through the difference that scale might make to their ideas while considering the extent to which their work can be transposed meaningfully across time and place. A critical and reflexive repositioning of these ideas may more sharply clarify the use and limits of performance and the role that affectual geographies have to play in global relations, geo-politics, the construction of nationhood and the going on of everyday life.

A final tension I have posed throughout this paper concerns the problem of representation itself. Representation and presentation do not exist as mutually exclusive practices, but can be seen as circuits through which the flow of discourse and action is continually relayed. While many adherents of performativity and non-representational theory may endeavour to achieve a radical breach with representation, the return to descriptions, interviews, diagrams, diaries, photographs is all too evident in the doing of research and the process of write-up. Of course the convention of academic writing entails the discipline of structure, logic and coherence which may sit uneasily with the experimental uncertainty and openness of non-representational methods. Where athletes, dancers, composers, chefs, visual artists or actors may express their art in embodied ways (see Smith, 2001) few academics can easily forego the power of language and the might of the written word. Experimental attempts to include photographs, video clips, scribbles and so forth do not necessarily transcend this methodological impasse, but only succeed in displacing it so that meaning is momentarily deferred (see Derrida, 1997). For Pile (2010) this ‘blind-spot’ amounts to a hypocritical deceit in which non-representational theory ‘is fundamentally a representational practice that is, importantly, unable to recognise itself as such’ (p.17).
One way of managing this conundrum is to work more closely with the excessive aspects of culture and representation as generative rather than ‘imprisoning’ devices. As Catherine Nash (2000) distils a retreat from representation entails an abandonment of a whole tradition of cultural geography that has made rich use of the intersections between discourses, images, signs, symbols, texts, spaces and practices. She intimates that ‘dance is always mediated by words’ (p.658), citing the carefully choreographed ways in which it is taught, scripted, performed and observed as it is co-ordinated through past traditions, genres, codes and conventions. In this vein we might consider Lorimer’s notion of the ‘more-than-representational’ to be a useful means of supplementing the more obtuse and philosophic aspects of work on affect in ways that do not write out the social but offer a more embodied, performative account of power and difference.

The ‘work of representation’ is also a feature of Stuart Hall’s (1997) writing in cultural studies. Here we find representations are not dead matter, but mobilise within a ‘circuit of culture’:

> It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them – how we represent them – that we give them a meaning. In part, we give objects, people and events meaning by the frameworks of interpretation which we bring to them […] the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them (p.3)

In this reading representation is cannot neatly be set apart from feeling, performance or immaterial sensations. Pursuing these suggestive lines I would argue that the slide from representation to presentation or performance is not a complete displacement as the phrase ‘non-representation’ may imply. For as Peter Jackson (2008:302) recently proclaims, ‘I do not see why such experiments in “non-representational” analysis must be cast as an alternative to, or in opposition to, constructionist accounts’. Instead, what we find is that the spectre of representation continually foreshadows many of the endeavours of non-representational theorists; an ambiguity cultural geographers need to be aware of as we wrestle with such unrelenting contradictions.

…Recomposing

The task of enlivening cultural geography is well underway. Popke’s (2009:88) recent remark that we are only just ‘learning to see differently’ is a hopeful opening, signalling that the world can yet be differently arranged (Lorimer, 2007). The sheer vitality of human existence certainly implies a need to energise discursive accounts that too easily fold into the familiar conventions of ‘talk and text’. It is argued that releasing the valve on representational modes of enquiry to discharge energy, matter and life into the more-than-human worlds of our being offers a means of doing cultural geography ‘otherwise’. In this regard affective and non-representational geographies are not just concerned with representation and meaning – though they maintain an interest in these ways of knowing – but their attention rests with the performative ‘presentations’, ‘showings’ and ‘manifestations’ of everyday life (Thrift, 1997:127).
The turn to performance has then encouraged a more immediate and embodied engagement with the social world in the ways I have tried to illustrate. There is a concerted attempt here to refigure geographical methods and textual approaches which have occasionally stilled the life before us. Non-representational geographers encourage us to reach beyond the ‘deadening effect’ (Lorimer, 2005) of discourse, to ‘dance a little’ (Thrift, date; Latham, 2003) and celebrate the world anew. They enquire if we are producing accounts of the living world that are ‘dead or alive’ (Thrift, 2000:1). Despite these arresting interventions I have emphasised the problematic of performance. Criticisms centre upon the narrow exclusivity of some philosophic non-representational debates; a will to overlook other embodied and emotional traditions; the unreflexive deployment of a strident universalism; an inability to account for scale; bold but contradictory assertions of political worth; and a tendency to reduce and deflate textual practices rather than navigate between the fault-lines of re/presentation. It is noted that a number of cultural geography papers on affect are hazy, experimental and imprecise in their rendering of the concept (Pile, 2010; Barnett, 2008), all too often ignoring vital feminist contributions on bodies and emotion (Nash, 2000; Thien, 2006; Pain, 2009), humanistic or psychoanalytic traditions (Pile, 2010) and the wider politics of representation.

At the same time the performative potential for ‘a more animated cultural geography’ (Author, forthcoming) through action-orientated methods such as ethnography, action research and particular participatory methods has tended to be undervalued. For ethnographers the visceral nature of raw encounter does not mean that experience cannot, or should not, be communicated. It is how we choose to do this and the sentiments we imbue our texts with that can yet be formative of the type of ‘sensual scholarship’ Back (2007) describes. Feminist participatory methodologies and reflexive ethnographies of this kind enable us to approach performance as embedded choreography, reminding us of the durable relations of power and the way in which the past bleeds into the present. By working through and against representation these approaches might signal a surplus of activity, a ‘what-elseness’ (Lorimer, 2007) made open by the possibility of performance.

To this end instead of emphasising the split between representation and presentation – or indeed theory and method – future work may yet seek to heal this fracture in order to yield more grounded, event-based understandings of a world-in-motion. The arbitrary nature of signs suggests a semiotics of potential that is always open-ended. Seemingly inert representations may incite feeling and usher forth fear or wonder. Discourses are performative utterances. They do not simply describe but incite and agitate in equal measure. As Butler (1997) imparts ‘excitable speech’ is testimony the manner in which discourse is performative and emotionally-laden rhetoric. The life-giving properties of discourse mean they are not simply repressive and regulatory matter, as at times characterised in non-representational readings, but inherently productive (Foucault, 1976). In this way Baudrillard’s (1996) work on signs, simulation and simulacra reminds us that representations are livelier devices than may have been credited. They can become the event, thus closing the gap between re/presentation. To this extent enlivening cultural geography by loosening the ‘dead weight’ of discursive approaches should not mean forgoing the potential of what-yet-might-be within representation. Exploring the abundant excess that lies within the
fold of re/presentation is a starting point for a meaningful cultural geography that is as open to power as it is to performance.
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To follow

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