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Assemblage Thinking and Participatory Development: Potentiality, Ethics, Biopolitics

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Abstract

The politics and ethics of participatory development have been a topic of vibrant debate since the 1990s. While proponents assert that participation emancipates and empowers marginalized peoples, critics assert that it enacts new forms of control and regulation. This paper reads these debates through the analytical lens offered by assemblage thinking. Assemblage allows us to foreground affective relations between people and things, and the diagrams of power, or ideal sets of force relations, that attempt to direct these affective relations. On this basis, we characterize different participatory approaches in terms of their relation to the constitutive power of affective relations: modernist participation enacts a will to truth that attempts to objectify and control constitutive power through categories such as social capital and vulnerability; performative participation recognizes that participatory activities, while still entangled in power relations, may develop in ways that might challenge existing power relations, *and* the designs of the project organizer. This characterization helps us identify a politics of life enacted through participatory activities: on one hand, a negative biopolitics that problematizes constitutive power; on the other, an affirmative biopolitics that creates new possibilities for individual and collective life. Assemblage thinking can thus reconfigure participation around an affirmative biopolitics that positions the researcher as one resource among others marginalized people might use in their struggles against insecurity and suffering.

Introduction

For better or worse, it is difficult to find development or disaster management programming that does not have some form of participatory engagement (Maskrey 2011). The current interest in participation is part of an ongoing reconfiguration of community-based work driven by resistance to top-down, hierarchical, command-and-control style approaches (Ribot 1999; Blaikie 2006). However, despite its mainstreaming, there is a certain ambivalence in participatory research. On one hand, critics argue that participation enables therapeutic styles of intervention in civil society (Pupavac 2001). While some argue that this reflects the limited aspirations of Western development and collapse of meaningful radical politics (Chandler 2004), for others it continues historical patterns of domination (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). On the other hand, research in fields such as social and feminist geography has detailed how participation is not necessarily reactionary (Pain 2004). Drawing on post-structural accounts of the subject and power (more on these below), this work demonstrates how participation can be a performative practice that produces new socio-spatial (and ecological) relations (Cameron and Gibson 2005).

In this paper, we seek to contribute to debates on the ambivalence and contradictions of participation (e.g., Mansuri and Rao 2004; Pelling 2007; Cook et al 2013) by reading participatory development as an assemblage. *Assemblage* signals unstable configurations of materialities and enunciations – bodies, desires, statements, discourses, strategies, and so forth (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). As we will detail below, assemblage thinking destabilizes the convenient fiction of a stable subject, and directs analytical attention in two directions: first, to affective relations that permeate assemblages and create desires and capacities, such as desires for betterment, vulnerability reduction, or reduced suffering; second, to diagrams of power that attempt to direct these affective relations and channel the constitutive power of bodies coming together towards certain outcomes rather than others.¹ Together, these draw out participation's biopolitical effects:² participation involves a variety of techniques that bring people, things, and knowledge together in ways that can consolidate existing ways of life, or create entirely new possibilities. While this biopolitics is often read in negative terms – for instance, as the production of docile, resilient subjects who live with rather than challenge conditions of inequality and vulnerability (Reid 2012) – assemblage thinking points to the potentials for affirmative biopolitics. It recognizes the affective potentials that subsist in the event of participation – the immanent encounter of people, things, and knowledge – and thus the

possibilities to invent new ways of relating to the other that do not reduce the other to a form that can be assimilated into, or mastered by, the self (Esposito 2011).

Thinking participation as an assemblage with biopolitical effects, rather than an instrument or discursive framing mobilized by a subject, creates a new set of ethical and political challenge for researchers and practitioners alike: how to ‘become’ part of participatory assemblages, a process we call here ‘becoming-resource’. To develop these arguments, the paper proceeds as follows: the second section specifies assemblage thinking and its use in recent development studies research. The third section reviews participatory development and disaster management in terms of assemblage thinking. This draws out how participation enacts biopolitical effects as it attempts to guide the constitutive force of people, things, and knowledge encountering each other in the participatory event. A concluding section reflects on the ethical and political implications of approaching participation as an assemblage.

Assemblage Thinking in Development Studies

A provocative line of research in development studies has begun drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) understanding of assemblage to analyze development policy and practice (e.g., Gidwani 2008; McFarlane 2009; Tsing 2005; Ong 2006). An assemblage is less a *thing* with defined borders and a clear identity than a *process*: a continual de- and re-composition that is only ever partially stabilized. An emphasis on becoming over identity and being differentiates assemblage thinking from two related forms of thought: complex systems theory and actor-network theory (see Ruddick 2010; Anderson et al 2012). For our purposes here, two points are key. First, in assemblage thinking, discrete bodies do not pre-exist their relations with one another; they are not drawn into relation with other bodies to form a complex system or actor-network. Instead, they are effects of ontologically prior affective relations that circulate throughout an assemblage. *Affect* signals a pre-individual capacity to affect and be affected by other bodies. This capacity is a relational force, the constitutive power to extend the scope and quality of being. Our understanding of affect draws on Deleuze’s reading of Spinozist ontology (Deleuze 1990, Piercey 1996). Rather than a bifurcated ontology of possibility-reality, in which reality is the negation of possibility, Deleuze offers a three-fold ontology of event-virtuality-actuality. What exists – being – is the messiness of bodies and words juxtaposed with each other: the immanence of pure difference, or what Deleuze refers to as the event. The event does not

consist of pre-existing bodies brought into relation to each other; it consists of different force relations intersecting with each other. The point of impact is a point of immeasurable capacity: the potential for force relations to affect each other in any number of ways. Deleuze terms this ideal set of affective relations the *virtual*. As these force relations – affects – move through material substance, they congeal into extensive bodies. This is a process of actualization: the production, out of pre-individual, intensive affective relations, of individuated entities with (always partial) identity, meaning and value (DeLanda 2002).

Key for our purposes here, Deleuze's threefold ontology of event-virtual-actual is *expressive*. It offers an account of life as productive, a process of ontogenesis (the creation of being) that produces extensive, actual bodies - individuated objects, thoughts, ideas, and so forth – *and* intensive, virtual capacities. From this perspective, any extensive being is always *exceeded* by the virtual potential to become other than it is. For Deleuze, the virtual thus signals the 'outside' of any apparently cohesive and unified object. However, there is no fixed boundary between this inside and outside: the virtual always subsists within the actual (Grosz 2001). The 'border' is instead a constantly mobile fractal (Massumi 1992): always moving, never settled, and always transgressed with lines of flight, or vectors of potential movement that can reconfigure the relations and capacities an assemblage embodies.

This brings us to our second point. Assemblages are never stable, as above, because they embody virtual potentialities: they are effects of force relations brought into relation with one another in particular ways, that can always potentially be reconfigured in different ways. Deleuze (1988) refers to the particular alignments of force relations as *diagrams*. Diagrams are virtual and incorporeal rather than extensive; they are 'real without being actual.' As a virtual set of relations between relations, diagrams give order and regularity to pure difference: they align affective relations in particular ways in order to actualize specific types of bodies – individuals and collectives with certain capacities and desires (Massumi 1992).

Three examples from recent work in development studies will help illustrate these philosophical arguments. First, Vinay Gidwani's (2008) analysis of development in India demonstrates the relations between diagrams and power. Gidwani approaches development as an assemblage that synthesizes dispersed elements and produces subjectivizing and objectivizing effects. Development 'reorganizes the conditions – or ecology – of human life for its betterment' (Gidwani 2008: 70) by connecting people, institutions, trees, water, soil, science, local

knowledge, and so forth. These diagrammatic connections produce material and affective functions that otherwise would not exist: for example, new kinds of economic activity, or the desire for a better life. These seemingly innocuous effects become political as development machines connect with other apparatuses, such as colonial order or the nation-state. Examining the articulation of development with the Indian post-colonial nation-state, Gidwani argues that the ‘development state’ deploys development in order to thwart the aleatory: unexpected events that could trigger famine, drought and in the extreme, social unrest and revolt.

Second, Aradhana Sharma’s (2008) work on empowerment in India helps us recognize how diagrams are not mutually exclusive. Assemblages can embody multiple and potentially conflicting diagrams; their constitutive elements can be structured around multiple diagrams at once. This is a kind of *contemporaneous multiplicity* (Massey 2005), the possibility for something to *be* several things at once because it is transversed by multiple diagrams. Sharma’s work on empowerment provides an example of this multiplicity. For Sharma, empowerment is irreducible to a single, essentialized meaning. It is part of reactionary neoliberal development initiatives designed to create self-sufficient, empowered citizens. It is *also* part of radical Freirian projects of class formation and consciousness-raising, *and* feminist development approaches, *and* Gandhian framings of development. Each of these forms of empowerment co-exist in a productive tension with one another. Their particular governmental effects – that is, the specific kind of subjects they produce – depend on how they relate to each other and other historical trajectories (such as class, caste, or gender relations), in specific times and places.

Third, Tanya Murray Li (2007) demonstrates how this multiplicity extends to subjectivities. Li argues that community forestry brings together multiple, heterogeneous interests, institutions, and actors through practices of assembling. These practices involve various kinds of programmes and interventions that do not always align with one another, such as attempts to secure community members’ property rights, and efforts to improve their forest management practices. Most importantly, there is no fixed set of subjectivities that animate struggles over community forestry. A ‘radical’ actor in one arena might be ‘reactionary’ in another. The politics of community forestry thus cannot be read through a straightforward matrix of domination and resistance. Instead, both power and resistance are contextually specific and determined by the relations between institutions, knowledge, and actors that comprise community forestry assemblages.

These examples all demonstrate how assemblage thinking can highlight previously under-acknowledged dimensions of development planning. It helps us recognize how development is one assemblage amongst others through which particular subjects, objects, and life-worlds are produced. Diagrams of development create new capacities amongst development agents, underdeveloped populations, and their surrounding environments: new ways of encountering and interacting with other bodies. However, these capacities are never fully contained in the meanings, identities, and values of development. These affective excesses give development a certain plasticity: in one particular context, development may be a vehicle for consolidating neoliberal socio-ecological orderings; it may *also* provide an avenue for subversive resistance, however narrow this path may be. Thus, rather than producing a set of universal, categorical truths for understanding and critiquing development practices, assemblage thinking directs attention to the contextually-specific relations through which development activities produce their effects. It complexifies rather than clarifies an empirical field, and in doing so, directs attention to *other* experiences and knowledges of development, empowerment and, key for our purposes here, participation, which deductive, categorical analyses might otherwise erase.

The remainder of this paper draws on these insights to review research on participation. In this way, it seeks to draw attention to the plasticity of participation as an assemblage, and raise a distinct set of ethical and political questions around a key techniques of contemporary development planning.

Assembling Participation

The emphasis assemblage thinking places on contextual specificity and contemporaneous multiplicity make it well positioned to contribute to current debates over participation. As we signaled in the introduction, for much of the past decade researchers have recognized that there is no single form of participation (Mansuri and Rao 2004; Parfitt 2004; Hickey and Mohan 2004). It is not a homogenous, undifferentiated exercise that empowers the poor or vulnerable. Instead, it can take on many forms and have contradictory effects (Cook et al 2013): it may be instrumental, emancipatory, democratizing, exclusionary, legitimizing, and so on.

Assemblage thinking brings a new perspective to this ambivalence. It does not understand this ambivalence through the figure of a master subject – a project designer or researcher, for example – free to choose between more instrumental or emancipatory project

design (cf. Pelling 2007; Gaillard and Mercer 2012). It also does not read participation in terms of competing discursive framings that result in more or less democratic forms of participation (Cook et al 2013). While these arguments offer valuable insights into the political, ethical, and relational complexities of participatory research, ultimately they hinge on the presence of a more or less stable subject: in these instances, a subject that reflexively chooses whether participation will be instrumental or emancipatory; and a subject that mobilizes discourses to frame participation in some ways rather than others, respectively. Instead, assemblage thinking recognizes the *diagrammatic* qualities of participation, and thus analytically severs participation from stable subjects of choice and discourse. Like development above, as a diagram participation aligns people, things, and knowledges in ways that create particular capacities. At this virtual level, participation is potential: the potential institutionally differentiated bodies affecting one another have to create different truth effects, and thus produce different ways of living together. While the reason these bodies are brought together may reflect specific institutional agendas and pre-existing power relations, and their encounter certainly brings different framings into conflict, these agendas and frames never fully envelop this potential. There are always *other* ways bodies and knowledges might relate to each other, even as participatory initiatives often reproduce dominant social and political economic structures.

Assemblage thinking thus enables us to approach different styles of participation as particular enfoldings of relations between bodies, things, and knowledges, which striate the virtual and attempt to structure its constitutive potential towards some purposes rather than others. The remainder of this section distinguishes distinct forms of participation on the basis of how they actualize this potential. Different forms of participation encode materialities and enunciations through distinct sets of concepts and categories that actualize bodies and ideas with specific meanings, identities, and values, and thus produce biopolitical effects that researchers interpret as more or less emancipatory, more or less hierarchical, and so on. The next section reviews modernist forms of participation.

Modernist participation

A defining characteristic of modernist participation is a liberal will to truth, the desire to turn every ‘thing’ into an object that can be perfectly known and controlled. This may at first appear contradictory: mainstream approaches to participatory development, following Chambers

(1983, 1995), assert that participation enables the poor to represent their own reality, to be subjects of their own development. However, making-subject as such occurs through objectifying the affective relations that make up the everyday lives of the poor and vulnerable, and the process of socio-ecological change, by coding them in categories such as ‘social capital,’ ‘confidence,’ ‘empowerment,’ and ‘transformation’ (Grove 2014a). This encoding is evident in the way modernist participation envisions different people coming together: each is an *individual* in possession of *interests* and unique knowledge. Participation provides an arena in which these individuals can voice their interests, communicate with one another, negotiate their differences, and reach the most mutually-beneficial outcome possible. Giving each individual ‘voice’ will, according to proponents, empower marginalized people and give them greater control over the policies and projects that affect their everyday lives. Participatory interventions are justified with reference to human rights: for example, local peoples have the right to conduct their own assessments of development needs and capacities (eg, Chambers 1995), and they have the right to make claims on institutions responsible for reducing insecurities (Chiwaka 2005).

Key for our purposes here, categories such as voice, empowerment, communication, and rights begin to narrow the constitutive possibilities of participation’s virtual structure: institutionally differentiated people become actualized as disempowered individuals with rights claims needing recognition; affective relations are reduced to acts of verbal communication and negotiating between competing interests; and knowledge effects become giving disempowered people voice. Each of these categories encodes participation in a modernist imaginary. For example, the understandings of communication that underpin much mainstream work draw on Habermasian theories of deliberative democracy, which assume interests can be unproblematically communicated through language (see Kapoor 2002; Pugh 2005a). The affective relations that comprise ‘coming together’ are here reduced to linguistic interactions that can be known, improved, and controlled by developing better communication techniques. Likewise, voice, empowerment, and rights are shaped by a modernist political imaginary. The subject of human rights is an abstract, objectified ‘human,’ a sovereign individual recognized by others as possessing rights claims and bearing certain responsibilities. This sovereign subject possesses a will that is the source of her interests. To the extent that a stronger will prevents the subject from expressing and fulfilling its will, it is disempowered. Empowerment thus becomes

an inherently political process of emancipating oppressed wills, which can be achieved through, *inter alia*, participatory activities that give them voice (Brown and Westaway 2011).

However, this is not the only modernist form of participation. While Chambers' adoption of Habermasian deliberative democracy has greatly influenced development donor organizations and state agencies, more radical approaches to participation draw on Freirian pedagogy and Marxist political economy. Early strands of participatory disaster management are exemplary here. In terms of participation's virtual structure above, the different people to be involved are vulnerable individuals. Their vulnerability is the result of uneven political economic relations that leave some people and places more exposed to hazards and less able to cope with disaster than others (O'Keefe et al 1976). The creation of difference is an act of conscientization: an individual and collective process of identifying uneven capitalist relations as the source of vulnerability (Wisner et al 1977). Participatory disaster management provides an arena in which radical scholars and vulnerable peoples can reconfigure state-society-donor-private sector relations in ways that challenge these political economic inequalities (Maskrey 1994). Empowerment is still at stake, but this is empowerment with a radical, collective purpose: empowerment not only to reduce poverty and vulnerability, but empowerment to change political economic structures that cause these conditions in the first place.

Disaster research during the 1970s and 1980s thus coded participation through different categories, such as vulnerability and political economy, which gave them a more radical edge than many contemporaneous participatory activities. However, these radical possibilities were largely de-actualized during the de-politicization of disaster management during the 1990s. The rise of vulnerability studies in particular began shifting the focus of disaster studies to addressing immediate vulnerabilities and suffering rather than long-term structural change (Middleton and O'Keefe 1998; Grove 2014c). As a result, participatory disaster management became de-territorialized from radical categories, techniques, and rationalities, and re-territorialized around less overtly political forms of conventional participation (Grove 2013a). For example, categories such as *social capital* allow researchers to envision affective relations amongst vulnerable peoples in ways that open these relations to subtle forms of cultural engineering (cf. Pelling and High 2005). Likewise, adaptive management techniques delimit how professionals engage with community members. For instance, adaptive management techniques can extract local knowledge on vulnerability to monitor a project's effectiveness, and adjust the project midstream

if required (Grove 2014b). Together, adaptive management techniques and technical concepts such as social capital allow practitioners to align policy and practice with one another (Gaillard and Mercer 2012), thus *preventing* (often inadvertently) the creation of difference.

These brief examples demonstrate modernist participation's liberal will to truth. As it actualizes in specific fields such as disaster management or development planning, contextually-specific people and their environments become objectified through techniques and categories such as adaptive management, social capital, workshops, transect walks, and so forth (Grove 2014a). These 'machinic effects' – the diagrammatic production of objects and subjects through, in this case, participatory programming – have been thoroughly critiqued from critical scholars drawing on Foucauldian notions of biopower (see note 2). This work details how participatory activities have become instruments for consolidating neoliberal rule amongst marginalized populations throughout the global South. It situates participation within the wider shift towards immaterial, 'therapeutic' (Pupavac 2001) forms of development and disaster management that do not seek to lessen economic inequality through material transformation, but rather manage the *effects* of inequality by producing confident, self-sufficient individuals and communities who can live with, rather than resist, conditions of material inequality and vulnerability (Pugh 2005b; Duffield 2007, Grove 2010). The 'resilient' communities and individuals participatory techniques produce live with insecurity, vulnerability and poverty, and adapt to these hardships *in situ* rather than migrating or taking part in political activities to disrupt institutions that manufacture their vulnerabilities in the first place (Reid 2012, Pugh 2014). From this perspective, participation de-potentializes vulnerable peoples whose physical and psychological mobility might otherwise threaten the infrastructure that sustains the global political economy (Pugh 2005a).

From this angle, the outlook for participation appears bleak. But rather than focus on seemingly all-encompassing governmental apparatuses that seamlessly produce their intended biopolitical effects, assemblage thinking points towards the outside of governmental apparatuses – in this case, to the virtual capacities participation produces. The possibilities for participation do not have to be confined to enacting a liberal will to truth; there are always *other* ways its virtual structure can be actualized, *other* directions the force of affective relations might move. One possibility is found in performative forms of participation, to which we now turn.

Performative participation

Our use of the term *performative participation* lumps together a variety of distinct theoretical and practical lineages that do not fit easily together, such as feminism, post-structuralism, and post-colonialism.³ For our purposes here, they share two characteristics that allow us to differentiate them from modernist participation: a common understanding of subjectivity and power; and an appreciation for the performative aspects of participation. In contrast to modernist participation, the subject of participation is not a sovereign individual that possesses interests and will. Instead, subjectivity is a relational effect. People come to see themselves as subject by virtue of their relations to other people, things, signs and images, discourses, and so forth. This view of subjectivity destabilizes a modernist political imaginary founded on the sovereign subject. Power is not something that constrains a subject's will; instead, it is relational and productive: it produces subjects with particular identities, agencies, and capacities (see Cameron and Gibson 2005; Kesby 2007). In this sense, participation offers one arena amongst others in which identities are formed through performative practice. As a performance, participation creates identities as participants interact with one another. For example, Turnhout et al (2010) demonstrate how participants may enter an exercise in the role of 'interested subjects', but may take on other roles in unexpected ways that cannot be planned for or controlled: they may lose interest and stop participating, they may stop advocating their interests and work for the success of the group, they may participate in subversive or creative ways.

As such, performative participation involves different kinds of research questions and concerns. Key here are the status of 'things' and 'space' in participatory activities. Both of these reflect the impact of seeing participation as performative: if participation is a performance, then interaction will be mediated not only through communication, following Habermas, but *also* through affective encounters with the bodies – human and non-human – that make up the space of participation. For instance, Askins and Pain (2011) use a participatory art project conducted with young people of different ethnic backgrounds to theorize how different objects may facilitate (or prevent) transformative interactions across social and cultural difference. The materiality of participation – the tools, instruments, devices, and substances used in various activities – conducts affective relations that can produce meaningful transformations both inside and outside the space of participatory activities.

However, this should not be seen as an undifferentiated approach. Indeed, there are key differences between early post-structural approaches organized around somewhat narrow readings of Foucault, and more recent work inflected by affect theory, performativity, and autonomist readings of biopolitics. For instance, a key critique of Habermasian communicative rationality came from researchers in participatory planning, who drew on Foucault to argue that power produces rationality (e.g., Flyvbjerg 1996; Yiftachel and Huxley 2000). This critique worked against the dominance of leading Habermasian-inspired participatory theorists during this time (notably Healey 1997, and Forester 1999). While undeniably effective, the critique closed off the constitutive possibilities of affective life through categories of power as all-encompassing governmental assemblages that unproblematically produced their intended subjects. In this light, more recent readings of Foucault drawing on his Collège de France lectures (esp. Foucault 2007, 2008) reconfigure the relation between biopower and life. Here, researchers account for regulatory biopolitical effects while *also* maintaining a sense of life as external, prior, and constantly transgressing governmental interventions, including participation (Anderson 2012; Philo 2012).

Despite these important differences, we can broadly characterize performative participation in terms of a distinct ethical comportment to the affective capacities participation can generate. Here, participation does not seek to emancipate marginalized peoples by giving them voice, or fulfill specific policy aims. Instead, it seeks to create a space – physical, social, and psychic – where *difference* might be produced, recognized, and valued as such. The goal here is to create new possibilities for association that might give rise to new identities, enable new kinds of reflection on uneven power relations, and engage in new practices that might push against these power relations (Cameron and Gibson 2005; Pain 2004; Pugh, 2013). It does not seek to reduce people and things to objects that can be known and controlled, but rather seeks to create transgressive possibilities, where different people might come together to create different ways of living within and against entanglements of power. It is less a *means* or an *end* than one *resource* among others that can be drawn on to combat inequalities and suffering (Kesby 2007). In short, performative participation replaces a liberal will to truth with a transgressive ethos of living together: where modernist participation seeks to objectify, corral and channel the affective force of people coming together towards specific aims, performative participation recognizes that

this force may enable unforeseen possibilities, even if these may undermine the original intentions or roles envisioned by project coordinators.

At this point, we can draw out two key contributions of thinking participation in terms of assemblage. First, assemblage thinking enables us to rethink the divisions between different kinds of participation. As above, it suggests that these differences do not emerge from project designers' reflexive, subjective choices. Assemblage thinking de-centers a master-subject : at the level of the virtual, the project officer is one person among others brought together to produce knowledge effects. Their intentions certainly inflect this process, but do not determine its outcomes. Instead, the outcomes of participation – what we reflexively judge to be more or less democratic, more or less emancipatory – are machinic effects, products of myriad forces juxtaposed with one another, working out their affective tensions within and through participatory spaces.

Second, along these lines, assemblage thinking draws out how participation is inescapably biopolitical. At stake here are the kinds of individual and collective life that participatory activities can produce. This is not just a matter of different discursive framings of participation that can produce more or less hierarchical forms of participation that preserve or upend established knowledge hierarchies (see Cook et al 2013). It *also* recognizes how the material, embodied circulation and interaction of people, things, and knowledge imbues these with particular meanings, values, and significance, and thus produces specific forms of individual and collective life. From this perspective, modernist participation enacts a negative biopolitics that reduces constitutive power, the force of difference, to substances – voice, social capital, adaptive capacity – that can be controlled and regulated in ways that do not threaten institutions such as sovereignty and property that produce inequality and vulnerability (see Dalby 2002). Performative participation points toward an affirmative biopolitics, a way of engaging with constitutive power that seeks to combat existing forms of suffering, inequality, and vulnerability, even if this may threaten systemic persistence (Esposito 2011; Hannah 2011).

Assemblage thinking helps us identify a politics of life at the heart of participation. It clarifies a new ethical imperative for participatory research and programming: to return participation to its virtual structure, to the constitutive possibility of people, things, policies,

knowledges, and rationalities coming together. The concluding section offers some possibilities for participatory work going forward.

Conclusions

This paper has used assemblage thinking to review debates in participatory development. Assemblage thinking directs attention to pre-individual affective relations that literally ‘make up’ assemblages such as participation and development, and the diagrammatic interventions that attempt to synthesize these force relations in particular forms rather than others. As such, it inculcates sensitivity to the outside of any programmatic intervention into socio-ecological life: the virtual structure of this encounter, the constitutive power of juxtaposed materialities and enunciations. Attention to this virtual field enables us to differentiate forms of participation in terms of their relation to constituent power. Here, we separated modernist participation organized around a liberal will to truth and modernist political imaginary from performative participation organized around a transgressive ethos – but other differentiations would surely be possible.

To be sure, in practice things are not as clear-cut as this. A will to truth, or other forms of division and objectification, can inflect performative participatory interventions. Likewise, performative sensibilities can circulate within modernist participation activities (see, e.g., Pelling 2007; Turnhout et al 2010). And it bears emphasizing that power relations circulate within and through any form of participation – participation is always entangled within (Cook et al 2013; Kesby 2007) However, these overstated divisions help us identify the possibilities for an affirmative biopolitics of participation that works against the categorical impulse to turn constitutive power and its formative affective relations into governable substances such as adaptive capacity and social capital.

How might future research advance this affirmative biopolitics? We see two potential interrelated avenues – although again, others are certainly possible. The first involves sensitivity to multiplicity within participatory encounters. This is a matter of de-territorializing bodies and processes from established categories of knowledge, in order that they may be re-territorialized in new ways through participatory activities. Key here is a genealogical ethic that continually looks towards what Foucault calls subjugated knowledge, or different experiences of social (and ecological) struggle, suffering, and violence that circulate below the threshold of discursivity (Foucault 2003; Philo 2007). These are experiences and knowledges that may not be

communicable through language because they cannot be shoehorned into conceptual categories shared by all participants (Grove 2013c). Nonetheless, they offer a window on alternative experiences and desires – of vulnerability, poverty, suffering, security, development, resilience, and so forth – that may point towards new lines of flight (Povinelli 2011). This requires a radicalization of the relationship between researchers and local knowledge (Pugh, 2013). Rather than finding ways to translate this knowledge into categories that can be used by state agents or researchers – in other words, assimilating the other into the self – the challenge is to find ways to relate to this other as other (Cavell 1981, 2010; Barnett 2005).

This brings us to our second possibility. De-territorialization also requires the researcher see herself as other, becoming ‘part’ of the assemblage. This process of becoming-other opens participatory activities to unforeseen, potentially radical possibilities. People may take part in participatory development activities for a variety of reasons; some may align with the goals of the project organizers, others may not. In this case, the organizers are less facilitators or instructors than *resources* marginalized peoples can creatively utilize in their daily struggles for survival and dignity in neoliberal environments that often deny both. Becoming-resource involves two kinds of reflection: first, as above, a genealogical sensitivity to multiplicity in the present. Participants may be enacting multiple forms of development, adaptation, resilience, and so forth, not all of which will be readily visible to organizers (Pugh 2013). Second, becoming-resource also involves recognizing how the position of ‘researcher’ is itself an assemblage of forces and capacities that could be useful for others seeking to fight inequality and suffering. This involves a different kind of reflection: reflection not on how one’s subject position results in partial knowledge, but rather how positionality equips each participant with unique capacities, or weapons that might be useful in shared struggles for common goals despite various axes of difference (Nagar and Ali 2002).

In summary, we suggest that assemblage thinking opens the possibility for radically politicizing the position of the researcher conducting participatory work:⁴ to see the researcher as both the content of participatory assemblages, and also the expression of other assemblages, all of which create biopolitical effects and affective potential (cf. Massumi 1992). We can no longer claim that participation necessarily empowers marginalized peoples, but we can recognize how it offers a variety of resources for both researchers and research subjects to challenge uneven power relations in potentially unexpected ways. The challenge moving forward is to devise ways

of engaging participants – both human and non-human – that work against the categorical closures of a liberal will to truth and its privileged centering of the researcher.

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Notes

¹ Our use of the term diagram does not refer to the common participatory technique of diagrams. Instead, as we detail below, our use of this term draws on Deleuzian philosophy, in which a diagram is a virtual, ideal set of relations between affective relations.

² Here, we use the term biopower in a Foucauldian/autonomist Marxist sense as a normative mode of power that seeks to improve and develop a population's quality of life. Biopower operates through a variety of techniques and rationalities, such as disciplinary mechanisms of individuation and surveillance, biopolitical techniques of statistical analysis, security mechanisms that regulate circulation, and environmental techniques that shape the affective life-world in which people, things, and information encounter one another (see Anderson 2012; Grove 2013b).

³ These approaches to participation could themselves be differentiated in terms of how each conceive the body, materiality, discourse, and so forth – but this falls beyond the scope of our more limited and coarse review here.

⁴ There are interesting parallels here between assemblage thinking and Third World, feminism (Sandoval 2000; Lugones 2003). While each conceives the 'body' in a different way (cf. Massumi 2002), this is nonetheless an interesting avenue for future research as well.