

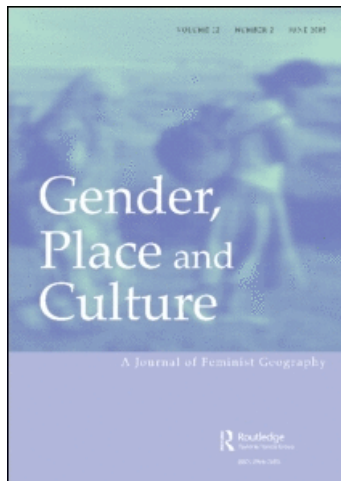
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Ontologies of Place, Placelessness, and Movement: queer quests for identity and their impacts on contemporary geographic thought

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ABSTRACT *The rise of and reactions to identity politics and practice have precipitated renewed debates about ontology in geography. Actor-network theory (ANT) and 'non-representational theory' have much to offer these discussions. Their de-centered notions of 'agency', topological (rather than Cartesian) spatial imaginations, and what I term 'humble' ontologies offer a way out of the seeming paradox presented by various binarisms underlying contemporary social theory and philosophy, such as structure/agency, essentialism/constructionism, subject/object, and theory/practice. The value of these approaches is very apparent when considering a particularly politicized form of identity practice: queer identity quests. They lead to (among other things) ontologies of place, placelessness and movement that are new, fresh, enriching and potentially empowering.*

Introduction

Discussions and debates about ontology have become particularly acute in the context of contemporary crises of social science and geography¹. One of the developments that has helped precipitate these debates is the rise of 'new' cultural identities and related forms of politics. I refer in particular to the self-conscious articulation and radical politicization of various experiences related to (usually subordinate) social status. Examples include modern forms of 'black consciousness,' along with the civil rights and other movements related to racial identities; women's consciousness, feminisms and women's rights movements; and the development of 'gay,' 'lesbian,' 'bisexual,' 'transgender' and other sexual identities and political movements associated with these (e.g. the gay rights movement: Pratt, 2000).

While many of these 'new' identities and related political movements may actually be old wine in new bottles², they do seem to have proliferated with the rise of 'Western' modernisms; and since they constitute direct challenges to at least some elements of entrenched power structures, they have precipitated quite virulent countermovements. These countermovements strike at the heart of the new identity politics by seeking to delegitimize and/or deny virtually everything about them, including their languages, practices, theoretical analyses, and ultimately their very

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existences. Thus these countermovements reassert not just the adequacy but the universality of dominant cultural values and categories (e.g. patriarchal heterosexual family structures). At the same time, however, and perhaps in response to the stalemate represented by these contending identitarian political positions, a new and even more radical *anti*-identity politics of hybridity and fluidity—variously termed diasporic, post-colonial, post-feminist and ‘queer’ (among other appellations)—has also emerged.

The ontological debate in this latter context is particularly interesting in that it focuses on how to make sense of and empower marginalized human subjectivities that are conceived from the start as multiple, fractured, and fluid, and that defy efforts to impose order on them. On one hand, theorist-activists with ties to the ‘new’ identity politics want to recognize and honor the lived experiences of marginalized groups and individuals whose ‘identities’ constitute important frameworks for the exercise of power, with very real consequences (e.g. oppression and empowerment) for real people (Knopp, 1995). This manifests itself in, among other things, calls for ‘strategic essentialism’ (Spivak, 1990, 1993). Anti-identitarian theorists and activists, on the other hand, argue in equally compelling ways for the importance of not reproducing concepts and categories that are themselves *part of* oppressive discursive and material regimes (Kobayashi & Peake, 1994; Gibson-Graham, 1996; Bacchetta, 2002).

The framing of the debate in this way, as a paradox or dilemma, may be about to melt away, however. Theoretical perspectives and social activism that purport to transcend paradigms responsible for the paradox—including the structure/agency, theory/practice, and essentialist/constructionist antinomies—are on the rise. I discuss here how two such perspectives, namely actor network theory (Serres & Latour, 1995; Murdoch, 1997a, b) and what Nigel Thrift (1998) calls ‘non-representational “theory,”’ can be fruitfully applied in the context of certain modern identity practices and politics such that some fundamental ontological notions in geography—especially place, placelessness, and movement—can be more practically conceived and used in everyday, as well as academic, life.

The particular aspect of identity practice and politics with which I concern myself I term ‘quests for identity,’ and the particularly apposite example I will use to illustrate it—drawing on a now rich and growing literature in geography and beyond—is certain spatial aspects of queer³ people’s (particularly, but not exclusively, gay men’s) experience. But it is important to note that this is only an example. Quests for identity have become common among many groups in contemporary individualist, secular, and otherwise modern ‘Western’ societies. And of course quests for meaning in other senses (e.g. Vision Quests; Walkabouts) have long been common in many non-‘Western’ contexts. It is the politicization of these modern/‘Western’ identity quests, and subsequent challenges to them from both conservative and radical perspectives, that I contend is particular to the current historical moment.

Queer Quixotics?

By ‘quests for identity’ I refer to personal (and sometimes collective, as in the case of nationalisms) journeys through space and time—material, psychic, and at a

variety of scales—that are constructed internally as being about the search for an integrated wholeness as individual humans living in some kind of community (if not society). In contemporary ‘Western’ contexts this amounts to a search for emotional and ontological security. Specifically, it is an effort to create order out of the chaos that is fractured identity combined with structures of power that discipline (and, too often for many of us, oppress) identity. This is accomplished through the creation and transformation of what sociologists call ‘communities of limited liability’ (Janowitz, 1952), from loose groupings that emerge out of some shared interest, and that enable individual self-actualization, into collective identities that demand a place at the table in some kind of a liberal imagination. For gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgenders, and other queers, as for other oppressed groups, this means seeking people, places, relationships, and ways of being that provide the physical and emotional security, the wholeness as individuals and as collectivities, and the solidarity that are denied us in a heterosexist world.

Both the life stories of and academic research on gay men, lesbians, and other sex/gender outlaws frequently feature very material geographical quests for identity in this sense. Among the most obvious manifestations of this experience at the collective level are separatist and anti-assimilationist political movements and strategies (e.g. Queer Nation; lesbian separatism); at the more individual level a good example is the widespread practice of distancing from families and communities of origin in order to ‘come out.’ That this is extremely common is well documented in the gay studies and sexuality and space literatures (White, 1982; Miller, 1989; Valentine, 1993; Leap, 1995; Binnie, 1997; Brown 2000; Knopp, 2000; Elder *et al.*, 2004). Story after story and study after study features people who are either rejected by or voluntarily disavow their roots and then *move* (often literally, but sometimes by radically remapping their worlds and their places in it) in order to ‘find themselves’ (or, more modestly, simply to protect themselves). Frequently this entails traveling great physical distances over long periods of time, and/or reinventing our everyday lived spaces and their meanings (see Valentine, 1998, for a particularly poignant discussion of how such movements and remappings are often forced upon us). Such experiences are common not only for gays and lesbians from unsupportive families and communities but, interestingly, for those from supportive ones as well.

My contention is that this is about more than just finding and/or creating new families, new relationships, new communities, and new *places* wherein at least some counterhegemonic norms prevail, and self-actualization is perceived as possible. It is also about testing, exploring, and experimenting with alternative ways of *being*, in contexts that are unencumbered by the expectations of tight-knit family, kinship, or community relationships—no matter how accepting these might be perceived to be. Hence rural to urban migrations of gay men, for example, are particularly common (Grebinoski, 1993; Fellows, 1996). But so are international, interregional and intraurban migrations and movements, as well as a general embracing of cosmopolitanism (Bech, 1997; Knopp & Brown, 2003). Such movements, as well as the difference experienced in ‘new’ environments, can be extremely liberating.

Clearly, these sorts of mobility practices are common for many people in contemporary individualistic societies and cultures, especially those with the

means to be physically mobile, such as those with class, race, and/or gender privilege. But their connections to a rather urgent perceived need to reinvent the self shine through particularly strongly in many, many accounts of gay and lesbian lives (Knopp, 2000; Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project, 2002).

At the same time, these accounts reveal gay and lesbian people's rather fraught relationships to the new places they encounter and create, and a nostalgia, at times, for the places left behind. This reflects the entirely predictable failure of a plainly utopian imagination that is at the heart of any quest of this nature. While life may be better as a result of these movements, it sometimes is not, and in any event there is no escape from the dominant culture of sex and gender to which we all belong and from which we almost all spring. Will Fellows (1996) illustrates this ambivalence particularly well in his compilation of first-person stories by mostly expatriate 'farm boys': The vast majority of his narrators no longer live on farms or in rural areas but express a sense of loss about this, along with a sense of at least partial alienation from their (chosen) new environments. Frank Browning (1996) captures a similarly fraught relationship to place in his very personal account of his own journeys, as well as those of others, in his book *A Queer Geography*.

More interesting still in these accounts (although it is underemphasized, in my opinion) is the attachment that many queer people—especially gay men—feel to movement itself, and a corresponding ambivalent relationship to both placement and identity. It is clear that many gay men find the quest itself to be a source of considerable pleasure (Bech, 1997), and eventually, for many, it becomes a source of ontological and emotional security as well. And while this too has its disappointments, the idea of movement, flux, and flows as important ontological sites in and of themselves, for both queer people and geographic thought, has been underappreciated and underdeveloped in the literatures on both. The fact is that being simultaneously in and out of place, and seeking comfort as well as pleasure in movement, displacement, and *placelessness*, are commonly sought after experiences for *many* people.

Actor-network (Serres & Latour, 1995) and so-called 'non-representational theory' (Thrift, 1998) have much to offer in making sense of this. Both are aimed at achieving practical ways out of the essentialist/constructionist, materialist/symbolic, theory/practice, grand theory/contingent theory, structure/agency, and other binaries that have precipitated so much heated academic debate—particularly in the context of identity practices and politics. In place of these impasses they posit what I will call humble (and Thrift, 1996, calls 'weak') ontologies (as well as epistemologies and methodologies). These resonate with and celebrate the richness, diversity, partiality, and incompleteness of human experience, rather than focusing on accessing 'truth.' This includes, importantly, appreciating a place for the unknowable as well as the knowable, and of so-called 'non-human' forces, in both our experiences as humans and our various attempts to make sense of them through 'theory' and practice.

In the remainder of this essay I explore three themes in actor-network and non-representational 'theories' that I find particularly helpful in making practical sense of identity quest experiences, and the implications of this analysis for ontological debates in geography. I pay particular attention to ontological discussions/debates about *place*, its corollary, *placelessness*, and *movement*. The three themes

are a de-centering and radical reconceptualization of *agency* (including what Whatmore calls '*materialist semiotics*'—Whatmore, 1998, p. 29), a *topological* (rather than Cartesian) *spatial imagination*, and an appreciation for the importance of *humility* (in particular, an awareness of the power of *non-human* and *unknowable* forces) in our efforts to think and act.

Agency, Topological Imaginations, and Humble Ontologies

Actor-network theory (ANT) is more of an approach to, rather than formal theory of, nature–society relations and the philosophy and sociology of science. It has been developing since the 1980s and 1990s out of the work of Bruno Latour, Michel Serres, Michel Callon, and John Law⁴. Its concerns are broader than mine here but its central focus on transcending dualisms, especially the nature–society one, are directly relevant to the approach to identity quests and related ontologies that I wish to advance here. What Nigel Thrift calls '*non-representational theory*', meanwhile, builds on and to some degree departs from ANT in ways that I also find useful.

One key aspect of ANT that is critical to making sense of identity quests is its approach to the concept of agency. According to Whatmore, ANT conceives of agency as a '*relational achievement, involving the creative presence of organic beings, technological devices and discursive codes, as well as people*' (1998, p. 26). It can be reduced neither to intentionality nor causal efficacy. Instead, it is an accomplishment generated out of diverse networks of biological (including human), technological, discursive, and inorganic elements whose own capacities and configurations can be every bit as important, and as creative, as the human consciousness and creativity that are also part of them. It therefore involves non-human as well as human capacities and '*actants*'⁵ whose effects are generated through '*chains of translation of varying kinds and lengths which weave sound, vision, gesture and scent through all manner of bodies, elements, instruments and artifacts—so that the distinction between being present and being represented no longer exhausts, or makes sense of, the compass and possibility of social conduct*' (Whatmore, 1998, p. 30).

What I take this to mean is that '*agency*' should not be seen as a purely human accomplishment nor as being all about cognitive processes and intentionality. Rather, it should be conceived as something that is the product of negotiations, of sorts, between all kinds of actors with seemingly autonomous (but actually mutually interdependent and determined) capacities. A gay or lesbian person's coming out, for example, is much more resonantly described (and fruitfully understood) as a highly contingent and contextualized *process* involving all manner of human and non-human forces than as an autonomous achievement of that individual coming to an epiphany and then '*choosing*' to act (although that may be one component of the process). Indeed coming out, while frequently characterized in a kind of discursive shorthand as a key moment of decision, is much more commonly described by those experiencing it as an always unfolding and very compelling *process* (Buxton, 1994; Johnson, 1997; Merla, 1997), involving multiple parties, over which the individual possesses only partial control at best. The relevant '*actors*' in this process are as likely to be other people and their actions, images, words, or even, scents or seemingly random objects, as the individual him or herself.

From an ANT perspective, the interaction effects⁶ brought about by the networks and relationships through which these various 'actants' are constituted are important as well. Among the capacities of these networks and relationships are semiotic ones. Rather than privileging the cognitive and the linguistic in processes of signification, ANT recognizes 'material processes of inscription, such as technical devices, instruments and graphics, and bodily capacities, habits and skills' (to which I would add, importantly, money, due to its enormous semiotic power) as also important. This is what Whatmore (1998, p. 29) means by the term 'materialist semiotics.' Conceiving of semiotics in this way explodes the binary of 'reality' and 'representation' at the same time as it de-couples representation from language and other forms of signification that are strictly human products.

ANT's conception of agency, then, frees us, ontologically, from viewing objects and phenomena, including humans and their actions, as either 'the passive objects of human will and imagination which litter the social sciences, [or] the autonomous external forces favoured in natural science accounts' (Whatmore, 1998, p. 28). Rather, phenomena can be material, discursive, individual, collective, active, passive, symbolic, 'natural', social, intuitive, mechanical, spiritual, and corporeal all at once. This is, of course, much closer to our actual lived experiences than more traditional theoretical imaginations allow.

Related to this, Whatmore (1998, p. 31) also draws our attention to ANT's implicit topological, rather than Cartesian, 'spatial imagination' (made explicit, she suggests, in the work so far of mostly economic geographers). A topological imagination focuses on connections, flows, simultaneity, situatedness, contingency, and 'becoming' (my term, not hers) rather than on fixed spaces, surfaces or dimensions onto which grids and other forms of logical order are superimposed. It is less concerned, therefore, with order, finitude and certitude than on incompleteness, fragility, and tenuous, fluid relationships. The world is seen not as a collection of transcendent 'truths' waiting to be mapped in ways edging ever closer and closer to perfection, but rather as an elusive and ephemeral flurry of activity marked by constantly changing topological relationships. Making 'sense' of the world through 'theory', then, becomes 'a practical means of going on rather than something concerned with enabling us to see, contemplatively, the supposedly true nature of what something is' (Thrift, 1998, p. 304)⁷.

Thrift (1998) develops this theme much more fully in the context of what he calls 'non-representational theory.' He includes ANT in the body of work that he characterizes under this rubric, and seems particularly fond of both the de-centered notion of agency and the topological imagination that Whatmore also identifies. Most fundamentally, he argues for ways of thinking about our worlds that are less grandiose in their aspirations, and less instrumental in their motivations, than modern Western philosophies have tended to be. Accordingly, he rejects almost all grand theoretical notions, including the notion of modernity and what he calls the 'building perspective' on space and time (the idea that these are vessels or grids onto which history and meaning are superimposed). In their place he advocates situated knowledges, notions of history that are grounded in metaphors and appreciated as 'practical' and 'performative' (rather than representational and truth-seeking), and 'ways of looking at space and time which emphasize *distribution, dynamism, effort, and friction*' (p. 308). This leads him to a very powerful and persuasive way of

thinking about places as ‘passings’ that ‘haunt’ ‘us’ (p. 310), and of what he calls the ‘ecology of place’ as ‘a rich and varied *spectral gathering*’ (p. 316).

This notion of places as ‘passings that haunt us’ probably resonates for many people, but for those engaged in identity quests it is particularly compelling. It intimates not only the ephemeral and elusive nature of the concept ‘place’ (which has vexed efforts to specify it in both everyday and academic terms for as long as it has existed), but also the ways in which places (and people) are constituted by changing practices and purposes that often have lingering legacies and myriad untold future consequences. Identity quests are, after all, very much about discovering and disclosing the self *in and through place*, and about *changing* place in such a way as to facilitate this process. They are inherently reflexive and relational practices. As we travel through places in these quests we internalize all manner of meanings even as we create new ones and leave legacies of our own. As so much ‘new’ social and geographical theory informed by the so-called ‘cultural turn’ constantly reminds us, space is not just a backdrop for history and place is not just space with meaning inscribed onto it (Duncan & Ley, 1993; Thrift, 1996; Mitchell, 2000). Rather, they are both active forces in shaping and defining human (and indeed non-human) life and events.

It is through this notion of ‘passings that haunt’ that Thrift also departs from ANT. While he deeply appreciates ANT’s de-privileging of human capacities in understanding agency and the world in general, he rejects what he calls its ‘vision of a radically symmetrical world of networks’ in which humans, non-human organisms, and non-organic matter are all more or less co-equal. Such a vision, he argues, is ‘reluctant to ascribe different competences to different aspects of a network’ and therefore ‘fail[s] to see the importance of place’ (p. 313). For it is through a number of particularly human capacities, he argues, that ‘much of what is passed through place and returns as hauntings’ is formed (p. 314). I agree with Thrift, and would add that ANT’s radically anti-humanist perspective is also at odds with its own awareness of situated knowledges, which, since we are all human, are always and inescapably understood in human terms. Nonetheless, one of the strengths of both ANT and non-representational ‘theory’, in my mind, is their epistemological and ontological humility. Both consider it terribly important to acknowledge the limits of both human intentionality and of what can ever be ‘known’. Quests for ‘truth,’ they imply, are not only misplaced but counterproductive, in that they emerge from a place of fear and arrogance rather than hope, and are thus ultimately ‘guilt-ridden, doom-laden and life-denying’ (Thrift, 1998, p. 302). In place of a de-centered notion of agency, and all manner of binaries (particularly subject/object, nature/society, and ‘reality’/representation), ANT and non-representational ‘theory’ offer a way of thinking about the world that both honors the messiness of experience and empowers action. Identity quests, for example, are understood as intensely reflexive, relational, and always under construction practices that are generated by multiple material, linguistic, technological and other capacities that inhere in *all* parties to the environments in and through which they take place, not just humans. Media, language, money, and technology can then be seen as working through and against human consciousness, in surprisingly creative ways (e.g. the hardware and software of the internet; the culture and meaning systems produced and transmitted through money), to

construct and police desire (Watney, 1989; Bell & Valentine, 1995). The 'agency' involved in identity quests, then, is understood as more than just a prerogative of human beings. Rather, it is an always incomplete and partial *achievement* brought about through networks of associations, capacities, and contestations that involve families, communities, language, technology, social institutions, resources of various kinds, and a wide range of discursive frameworks.

By in essence recognizing the limits of humanity in quests for understanding, this epistemological and ontological shift actually empowers action. It encourages us to focus on the possible rather than the impossible, the knowable rather than the unknowable, and the present and embodied rather than the abstract and disembodied, while simultaneously cautioning us about ambitions that are too grand. This has profound implications for understandings of all manner of things. Whatmore (1998), for example, is particularly interested in its implications for how we conceive of 'nature,' and by extension human-'nature' relations. In particular, she argues that a 'geography of wildlife' informed by ANT would inevitably focus on, among other things, the 'spaces of relation' that emerge from 'the volatile eddies and flows of socio-technical networks that bring people, living organisms and machines together in new and particular ways' (p. 34). Thus the binary of nature-society is exploded and the capacities of non-human entities in shaping both their and human experiences are highlighted in one fell swoop. 'Nature' and 'society,' then, are understood as neither binary opposites nor as reducing ultimately to either text or matter. Rather, they both need to be seen as entailing material *and* discursive elements whose various configurations, capacities, and relationships are really what is at issue. Furthermore these are never fixed (although they may be more or less durable across space and/or time) and always in the process of becoming.

Ontologies of Place, Placelessness and Movement

Clearly this way of thinking has significant implications for geographical ontologies. I focus here on just three: *place*, its corollary *placelessness*, and *movement* (in particular, diffusion). Both have been conceived in multiple ways depending upon theorists' philosophical, epistemological and ontological commitments. Because of their elusive and ephemeral natures, and their inherent opposition to (or at least straddling of) the boundaries between object/subject and text/context, identity quests defy almost all existing ontologies of place and movement, especially those that have their origins in some kind of modernist and/or structuralist thought. Diasporic notions of identity such as Paul Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic' (1993) are an improvement, in that they recognize the importance of more fluid geographical ontologies in making sense of identity. But these kinds of post-colonial efforts seem much more interested, ultimately, in identity than in geography, and therefore do not really develop fully their geographical imaginations. Among geographical theorists, considerably more work has been done that incorporates the significance of 'new' cultural identities and identity politics into geographical theory. But with the exception of debates about essentialism, surprisingly little of this has focused on ontological issues. Instead, particular attention has been paid to epistemological and methodological issues, as reflected in numerous discussions and debates about positionalities and research ethics (Rose, 1993; Blunt & Rose, 1994; Nast, 1994).

One topic that has attracted attention, due to its centrality to almost all geographical enterprises, is place. Debates about place have primarily involved traditionally scientific (including dialectical) thinkers versus more existential and phenomenological ones. But in virtually all cases the approach to place has tended to be grounded in a representational ontology that sees it as something to be specified or explained. Positivist, realist, and idealist approaches, for example, seek to understand place as a real, usually material entity possessing causal powers, and its ontological status is confirmed through the detection of its effects. This detection can be either direct (e.g. 'the neighborhood effect' of positivist social science) or indirect (e.g. through theory, contemplation, and reflection, as in transcendental realism). In phenomenological and existential approaches, meanwhile, place is seen in both material and more metaphysical terms, and in relation to a broader range of particularly human experiences. Pickles (1985), for example, argues for a 'place-centred ontology of human spatiality', which he describes as the discursive and existential parameters within which knowledge is created. In this sense place becomes a fundamental condition of human existence, albeit one that is potentially flexible and reinventable. While there is much more room, therefore, for place to take on multiple and fluid characteristics in this approach, Pickles' ontology is still 'foundational' (Gregory, 2000) in the sense that it is seen as a fundamental frame of reference or causal force in human life, albeit one that is shaped and reshaped in a recursive relationship with human agency.

ANT's de-centered notion of agency, by contrast, along with its 'topological imagination', and the humble (or 'weak') ontologies of both ANT and Thrift's 'ecology of place' perspective (1998), is even more elastic and, in my view, more compelling. It focuses on the messy and most ephemeral aspects of the experiences and practices we call 'place' (including those involving non-human forces). Rather than objects that need to be specified theoretically or even fully understood, places become the 'passings' discussed above. They are fluid and ephemeral, always contingent and always in the process of becoming. In addition, they are 'disclosive', in the sense that they evoke, enable, and denude simultaneously. They are conjunctions of (frequently empowering) time and space-specific material practices and events at the same time that they are generative (and reflective) of meaning. Processes of representation, such as abstraction and interpretation, may have a place (no pun intended!) in the 'ecology of place', but can never capture the elusiveness of place as a 'spectral gathering' (nor should they). A great deal is intriguing about this formulation, most notably its (inherently spatial) ontology of 'fluid encounters, juxtapositions and divergences' (Gregory, 2000, p. 564). But equally compelling are its critique of representational practices as arrogant and elitist, and its insistence on reflexivity, or engagement in the processes being examined by those doing the examining. Also appealing is its decentering of human beings in the elegant, evocative, and uplifting notion of a 'spectral gathering'. All of this resonates quite instinctively with the experience of queer (and other) identity quests. Queers are actively engaged in processes of personal reinvention that intrinsically entail examinations of ourselves and our surroundings. We are keenly aware of the hybrid nature of our existences, and of the highly contingent nature of both our power and the constraints on it. Hence our ambivalent relationships to place and identity, and our affection for placelessness and movement.

Existing ontologies of place's corollary, placelessness, are even less well equipped to deal with the identity quest experience. Geographers of almost all philosophical and epistemological stripes have largely conceived of placelessness (to the extent that they have considered it at all) as place's opposite, which is to say as an absence or a lack rather than as an embodied experience or practice that *is* or *does* anything. But if placelessness is conceived as something active, something practiced, or as an embodied and material form of *agency* (conceived of in de-centered and hybrid terms, as discussed above), it becomes much more recognizable to gay men, lesbians, and others struggling with issues of identity. Whether because of its perceived homogeneity, its allegedly transitory character, the anonymity it supposedly provides, or its cosmopolitanism, the experience and practice of placelessness can dispense enormous amounts of both pleasure and emotional/ontological security to such individuals, particularly if they are marginalized or oppressed (see Bech, 1997, for a discussion of this in the context of gay men). ANT's and Thrift's humble ontologies, despite an apparent contradiction (namely, an anti-representational rhetoric—by its nature a bit of an oxymoron), again offer a way of conceiving of placelessness as *practice* that is very resonant with the identity quest experience.

A final ontological implication of identity quests has to do with the ways that we conceive geographically of movement. I use the relatively narrow example of diffusion to make my argument, in part because of the impressive and diverse pedigrees of its theorists (see Knopp & Brown, 2003, for a detailed discussion). But I also focus on diffusion because of the especially apposite ways in which queer diffusions embody the approach to movement that I am advancing. As queer bodies and subjectivities circulate through (and constitute) time and space, they leave legacies, absorb others, and mutate. They spread information, values, and culture, and constitute barriers to such spreads at the same time. This is diffusion *par excellence*. Furthermore, they do so in an intensely recursive set of networks, relationships, and other fluid engagements involving all manner of objects, bodies, technologies, and discursive practices. Thus the networks, relationships, and flows themselves, like the identities and places through which they are constituted (and in whose constitution they also participate), are always in the process of becoming, rather than fully formed. My argument, then, while constructed narrowly around the issue of diffusion, is meant to apply to the issue of movement much more broadly conceived.

Actor-network and 'non-representational' theories have a great deal to offer when it comes to conceptualizing diffusion, since both concern themselves centrally with networks and flows. Most 'scientific' ontologies of diffusion, while sharing this interest, focus ontologically on autonomous actors and objects circulating amongst origins, destinations, and pathways (often construed as 'vectors'), and see these primarily as static bearers and carriers of objects, information or intentions (e.g. Hagerstrand, 1967). The pathways, vectors and flows themselves are not seen as having quite the same ontological status as the places and sites that they connect, although the patterns that they constitute may be very significant. Moreover they are rarely seen as complexes of social *practice* entailing complicated sets of power and other social relations. They are evaluated still less in terms of what it is that they may generate ontologically themselves.

More phenomenological and post-modern approaches do allow the possibility of these pathways, vectors and flows having the ontological status of sites (Knopp & Brown, 2003), and they may even be conceived in terms of practice (Blaut, 1987, 1993). But so far these critical perspectives have also done little around the idea that these movements may, through their contingency, fluidity, and incompleteness, constitute practices of reflection and reinvention that are as ontologically significant themselves as the sites they connect, the phenomena they bear, or their physical descriptions and trajectories.

ANT and 'non-representational theory,' by contrast, approach diffusions such as those manifest in queer identity quests as hybrid, relational, and reflexive enterprises from the start. They see these enterprises as involving human as well as non-human 'actants,' and as generative of all kinds of important ontological weight. Like the 'spectral gathering' that is the 'ecology of place,' the 'study' of these enterprises is approached as an exercise in 'describing becoming,' one that 'both value[s] and multipl[ies] anomaly, receptivity and imaginative capacity' while at the same time celebrating those most fleeting of these diffusions' spatial manifestations: 'ghosts, apparitions and monsters, magic, haunting and dreams; rites, rituals and raves' (Thrift, 1998, p. 317). Thrift's language here is deliberately evocative. It suggests the momentary yet life-affirming quality of the ephemeral, and in so doing communicates very effectively the ontological weight (including pleasures) of movement.

Conclusion

Queer quests for identity, offer several interesting avenues for reconsidering our ontologies of place, placelessness and movement. Using the skills that ANT and 'non-representational theory' help us to develop, we can think about these concepts as fluid and 'under construction' sets of spatial *practices*; these practices, meanwhile, are construed as generated in and through networks and relationships, and as involving all manner of human and non-human 'actants.' Importantly, they dispense pleasure, security, and empowerment along with (always partial) knowledge and understanding. From the perspective advanced here, then, place, placelessness, and movement are much more than just origins, destinations, bearers, carriers, lacks, or hegemonic discursive frames of reference. They are relational phenomena that are intensely human, yet always at the same time more than human. And perhaps most importantly, they are practices, and ways of thinking and acting arising from these, that we can use wisely, rather than just instrumentally. For they have the potential advantages, if deployed ethically, of minimizing the arrogance and elitism of abstract representation, of honoring the messiness and indeterminacy of human experience, and of forcing political and ethical engagement through their deep reliance on critical examinations of self and surroundings.

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Notes

1. It is important to note that both these discussions/debates and the crises of which they are a part are global in scope but profoundly uneven in the ways that they are experienced and expressed. Ultimately these have to do, in my view, with the contradictory practices and meanings that inhere in contemporary social systems, including global and local-scale capitalisms and associated practices, cultures, discourses, and resistances.
2. While specific categories and constructions have varied substantially, racial, gender, and sexual identities and politics all clearly have extensive pre-modern histories (Boswell, 1982, 1995).
3. I do not wish to enter here into debates about appropriate terminology when referring to gender and sexual minorities. Suffice it to say the term 'queer' has emerged in a variety of theoretical and political discourses as one that signifies inclusion, hybridity, a reappropriation of oppressive terminologies and stereotypes, and an anti-identitarian politics (Phelan, 1997).
4. I need to make clear here that much of my knowledge about ANT comes from secondary sources (Murdoch, 1997a, b; Thrift, 1996, 1998, 2000; Whatmore, 1998) rather than foundational texts (although I have begun to work through some of these—most notably Serres & Latour, 1995).
5. In ANT, the term 'actant' is sometimes preferred to 'actor'. This signifies the approach to agency as a relational achievement rather than one born exclusively of human creativity, consciousness and desire (Whatmore, 1998, p. 27).
6. The use of this term here is mine, and deliberately a bit playful. From the perspective I am advocating here, the idea of 'interaction effects' is actually ontologically flawed, as it suggests the prior existence of autonomous individuals and objects colliding in space whose contacts with each other then generate equally autonomous new ontological entities in the form of 'effects'. ANT, by contrast, sees 'actants' ontological status as constituted as much by the networks and relationships of which they are a part as by qualities or characteristics inhering solely in the actants.
7. It should be noted that Thrift is speaking here of what he terms 'non-representational' rather than actor-network theory. But in so far as he cites Serres, Latour and actor-network theory by name—as well as Donna Haraway—in making the argument, I view it as entirely consistent with Whatmore's point about a topological imagination.

Abstract translation

El ascenso de y las reacciones hacia la política y la práctica de la identidad han precipitado renovados debates sobre la ontología en la geografía. La teoría del actor-red y 'la teoría no representacional' tienen mucho para aportar a estas discusiones. Sus nociones de una agencia decentrada, de imaginaciones espaciales que son topológicas (y no cartesianas), y de lo que yo he denominado 'humildes' ontologías brindan un camino para salir de la aparente paradoja planteada por los varios binarismos que subyacen la teoría social y filosofía contemporánea; binarismos tales como estructura/agencia, esencialismo/construccionismo, sujeto/objeto, y teoría/práctica. El valor de estos enfoques es evidente cuando se consideraba una práctica de la identidad que está especialmente politizada: las búsquedas por la identidad *queer*. Nos llevan hacia (entre otras cosas) las ontologías del lugar, del estado de no pertenecer a ningún lugar y del movimiento que son nuevas, frescas, enriquecedoras y potencialmente empoderadoras.

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