

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison (eds), *Taking-Place: Non-Representational Theories and Geography*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-7546-7279-1 (paper); ISBN: 978-0-7546-7278-4 (cloth)

The first question to ask when reviewing a book that's three years old is why bother? Since its publication *Taking-Place: Non-Representational Theories and Geography*, edited by Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison, has had over 90 citations, but only one citation in *Antipode* (Springer *et al.* 2012). Most radical geographers have not embraced non-representational theory despite the repeated claims by those who write under the NRT banner that it has radical potential (Thrift 2004; McCormack 2006; Amin and Thrift 2007). NRT has been critiqued as mechanistic, masculinist and apolitical (Thien 2005; Tolia-Kelly 2006), but in looking at the many citations of this text those debates have fallen to the wayside. I will argue that *this* edited volume may be the starting point to a fruitful conversation if we give it a chance. *Taking-Place: Non-Representational Theories and Geography* is worth the time of a review because there may be something good for us here.

This edited collection includes a diverse range of chapters, many on topics not commonly thought to be in the purview of NRT but that are common in radical geography. The text includes an introduction followed by four sections (Life, Representation, Ethics, and Politics) with four chapters each. There is also an 'interlude' - an interview with Nigel Thrift that grounds the book in the genealogical history of NRT. The essays included are less didactic than focused on actual events and specifics, which will be a welcome change to those concerned with social justice. Despite being well versed in the literature, this book challenged my assumptions about NRT and many within the radical geography community will find things of interest here.

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The strength of this collection is the clear purpose expressed in the writing. The various authors are taking subjectivity seriously and trying to address many of the concerns expressed against NRT more generally. For instance, the writings of non-representational geographers are often deeply unsatisfactory politically for many within the critical wing of geography because NRT is addressed at the individual level, even if individuals are assemblages enmeshed in others (Barnett 2008). The question becomes, ‘What is the political use of NRT? How can NRT be used to fight against oppression if it is so radically individual?’. What makes this text different than the other NRT writings mentioned above is that it addresses the concern head on. In the introduction, the editors stress that while they believe there “is no supplementary dimension to the social”, they also acknowledge that there are durable orders which “include many forms of damage, loss, suffering and harm”. However, they also claim that “thinking through how systematic processes of harm *become* systematic” is a politically valuable activity (p.18). The task, then, as they see it, is to discover how differences come to be durable and exert force alongside the many relations that together make up the social. NRT begins with the primacy of process, opening up the questions of change, how those durable orders could be disrupted, and how new orders come into being. The essays then try to tackle the processes by which subjectivity, both human and non-human, come into being.

There are a number of pieces that the readers of *Antipode* will find useful either in their research or teaching. In particular, the introduction, ‘The Promise of Non-Representational Theories’, should be read widely because it is as clear an explanation of the fundamentals of NRT as is out there currently. This introduction is not a history of non-representational thought, but does address the context and practices utilized in this intellectual movement and has not gone out of date in the past three years. This introduction to NRT is clear and concise enough that upper level undergraduates could easily be walked through the main tenets as described. The interview

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with Nigel Thrift is also remarkably jargon-free and thus easily understood. It's a really valuable text for those coming from a Marxist or feminist perspective because Thrift addresses directly issues of class and economic disparity and the concerns raised by feminist scholars about the lack of a 'subject' in NRT. While many may not be satisfied with his responses, by clearly articulating his positions Thrift is adding to the conversation between NRT and other intellectual trajectories in the discipline.

Other conversations within the book will also be of interest. There is a fascinating chapter by David Bissel on pain that describes the difference between emotion and affect clearly and precisely, hinging on the importance of context. Context is also the centerpiece of Kirsten Simonsen's discussion of Orientalism, which explains this idea in a different manner from Edward Said's (1979) classic book, and would be very useful to students and researchers interested in subjectivity, identity and difference. The text also includes a number of chapters which seriously confront the 'mechanistic' stereotypes of non-representational geographies by focusing not just on human subjectivity, but "developing geographical approaches that are better attuned to the ways in which we (as human agents) intervene in and are shaped by the life worlds of others" (Beth Greenhough, p.38), some explicitly looking at the life worlds of non-human beings (Hayden Lorimer; Emma Roe). Lastly, there are a number of chapters that discuss in detail the methods used in these non-representation studies, which is useful for readers who would like to incorporate these ideas into their own research.

While the collection offers a range of important and provocative contributions, unfortunately most chapters still would not be able to express how the power relations embedded in classifications of people, such as gender, race or class can be reworked using the methods and practices of NRT (the pieces by Kirsten Simonsen, Arun Saldanha and Steve Hinchliffe are notable exceptions). This is a serious problem for many scholars who have built their careers on

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exploring and fighting these structural categories. Given the stated objective of the editors to examine how ‘systematic processes of harm *become* systematic’ I was a bit surprised that few chapters dealt with this topic directly. The chapter that best addressed this concern was Saldanha’s piece ‘Politics and Difference’, which, while very theoretical, is empirically driven (though I would have preferred a non-literary example). Saldanha’s work uses Deleuze and Guattari’s (1983) categories of ‘molar versus molecular’ to explain the difference between structural and non-representational ways of addressing difference. This chapter in particular allows those with a critical background an entry point into the discussions of NRT that feels politically meaningful.

I read this text looking for ways that NRT could contribute to the fight against various kinds of domination, and I was heartened to find many of the topics addressed close to my radical heart: the nature of subjectivity; the life (and death) worlds of non-human animals; the importance of context to understanding difference... In essence the topics of the essays were familiar, while the approach was less so, which is always a welcome occurrence. My initial difficulty with the volume was similar to the critiques of NRT mentioned above, that I was left at the end still unclear how utilizing the approaches taken by most of the authors could do more than identify already known oppressions. Mitch Rose, in his concluding chapter, would likely respond to this critique by stating that I am missing the point. Non-representational theory is radically focused on the present, not the future. Therefore, Rose would argue that NRT is more diverse and dynamic in its capacity to register the multiple configurations of the ethical/political that may be lost in a more representational approach to oppression, or politics more generally. So my concern about ‘already known oppressions’ is stemming from my desire to fight for a ‘better’ future (which Rose thinks is limiting my ability to see the present). NRT certainly may be a politics of “generous pragmatism” to “extend and enliven the capacity by which we (and others)

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live” (Rose, p.343), but I’m not willing to give up the future. In fact, I don’t think NRT is either. The possibilities present in understanding how processes become systemic can lead to an understanding of how to change those processes, otherwise why do it? And if you can change the processes, you can change the outcomes (extending the capacity by which we live).

As I thought more about Rose’s likely response to my concerns with the text and the editors’ explicit arguments about process I realized I should approach this ‘difficulty’ as a challenge, and you could too. The opportunity within NRT is that the exercise of power is a *moment* in the present; we can continue looking to the future, but to intervene we must ground ourselves radically in the present. Radical geographers haven’t ignored the present, but NRT has an alternative method to interrogate it. There is political potential in NRT, unfortunately few of the authors in this volume followed this political task to its logical conclusion. There are many chapters that will contribute to critical scholarship and perhaps it is up to *us* to make NRT radical. This book sets up path markers, but we must blaze the trail. This exchange has begun (see Clough 2012; Colls 2012; Sandalha 2013; Somdahl-Sands 2013) but I look forward to seeing how others will take up the challenge and drive these ideas even further.

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Katrinka Somdahl-Sands
Department of Geography and Environment

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Rowan University
somdahl-sands@rowan.edu

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