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Engaging with Deleuze's Geophilosophy

Deleuze's impact on contemporary geography has been immense. His philosophical fingerprints are everywhere; his ideas of assemblage and territorialisation have had particular endurance in thinking through the achievement of urban spaces, geopolitical arrangements, and the geographies of everyday life.

But parallel with the growth in assemblage theory/thinking has been criticism that geographers have misunderstood Deleuze and Guattari's project in some fatal way, and that the use of their ideas has often failed to bring about new understandings of sociomaterial forms. Instead, we're often just describing things we already know with some flash new language. As Ian Buchanan–one of assemblage theory's major advocates and most vocal critics–recently cautioned, rather than producing "a new understanding of the problem, it simply gives us a currently fashionable way of speaking about it" (2015: 391).

There are many reasons for this. For one, the messy heritage of assemblage and assemblage-like ideas from actor network theories (Bruno Latour), "neo-Deleuzians" (Manuel DeLanda) and vital materialists (Jane Bennett), among others, can lead to major disagreements that are often left inadequately interrogated. Assemblage is a broad church in which different positions often come into direct conflict. There is a creeping teleology in some of DeLanda's writings, for instance, while ANT-inflected accounts often emphasise immanent material networks while failing to provide explanations of how *these* particular arrangements came to be. Geography's relative theoretical promiscuity is undoubtedly a great strength of the discipline. But it means irreconcilable ontological differences are sometimes glossed over.

For geographers, Doreen Massey (2005) argued "space matters". It may seem obvious, but it was a reminder to resist the impulse to treat space as a static backdrop in order to better understand the dynamic politics of place. It is a view shared by geographers who

adopt the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari, whose concepts provide possibilities to rethink space in less representational and more relational ways. At the same time, some geographers who have turned to the concepts of Deleuze and Guattari have been charged with embracing their ideas without changing how they think about space. For example, Buchanan (2017: 458) argues that concept of assemblage has become a "received idea"–"an idea that is so well understood it no longer bears thinking about in any kind of critical way".

Scholars from inside and outside of geography have argued for more careful engagements with Deleuze, not out of uncritical fealty to original texts, but because it appears something important has been lost along the way (Dewsbury 2011). Arun Saldanha's new book, *Space After Deleuze*–the newest addition to Bloomsbury's "Deleuze Encounters" series (which is edited by Buchanan)–is a timely response to this call for rapprochement with Deleuze and Guattari. Saldanha has himself been quite a vocal critic of geography's engagement with both Deleuze (Saldanha 2006) and Guattari (Saldanha 2015). While *Space After Deleuze* too is technically a secondary text, it offers a fairly faithful account of what a Deleuzian geography may look like. While Saldanha admits that "Deleuze does not have an extensive philosophy of space…" (p.3), he claims a coherent spatial theory is "implicit in his discussions of material and semiotic processes" (p.171). Saldanha sets out the thinking behind Deleuzian space and, in doing so, demonstrates "his oeuvre is already geographical" (p.5).

Much like the major work it draws on, *Space After Deleuze* is structured less like a tree than a rhizome. Following Deleuze, Saldanha emphasises the role of concepts in thinking the world anew. Each of the four chapters–"Earth", "Flows", "Places", "Maps"–opens up lines of spatial enquiry by moving through Deleuze's vast conceptual assemblage. Thus the famous instruction that *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) can be read in any order might also be applied to Saldanha's book. However, he explains, the "intention is…to introduce a meshwork of concepts so that a systematic Deleuzian spatiality becomes possible across them" (p.5). As Saldanha argues, while Deleuze's work often appears radically unconventional, "his oeuvre adds up to a consistent system" (p.1)–one founded in an

immanent ontology of desire.

Readers will likely note there is no entry on "assemblage". But there's good reason to move the discussion "beyond" assemblages. While geographers have made much of Deleuze and Guattari's work on assemblages, much less attention has been paid to the vast array of other ideas they develop. Through moving rather rapidly through these more peripheral concepts–war machines and nomads, phyla and islands–Saldanha shows that these too can be mobilised to think through spatial forms of all kinds. Geographers would do well to turn to these other concepts, each of which works to stress different aspects of assemblages.

Thinking through the major issues of today–climate change, urbanisation, globalisation, the changing composition of entire earth systems–Saldanha argues that "Deleuze provides one of the best philosophical resources for continuing and refining the project of giving a dynamic thickness to space" (p.3). While the book can certainly be used instrumentally–a tool box of concepts geographers might deploy for approaching familiar things in new ways–its most important contribution to geography is its overall effect on thinking spatially. In particular, there are three somewhat overlapping Deleuzian interventions Saldanha emphasises that I will discuss in some detail here: a commitment to immanence; a recognition of the virtual; and a commitment to radical politics. In this way, Saldanha shows us the way towards achieving a more thoroughly Deleuzian geography.

Commitment to Immanence

First, the book reaffirms a commitment to an immanent ontology of desire. Too often geography's engagements with Deleuze openly reject essentialism and teleology only to let them in through the back door. Saldanha writes that "Deleuze's project is…to affirm immanence, to critique *this* world in all its violent intractability" (p.13), rather than rely on easy transcendental notions that prioritise pre-given human subjects and spatial forms.

Deleuze's immanent geophilosophy is explored most explicitly in the first of the book's four major sections, "Earth". Here, Saldanha argues the current crises of the planet–social, biological, geological, and so on–urgently demand a rethinking of the Earth itself. He

suggests no doubt provocatively that the "Anthropocene is a global reality that, of all philosophical works, *A Thousand Plateaus* comes closest to providing an ontological framework for" (p.25). The Anthropocene, and the multitudinous processes its encapsulates, exceeds any notion we have of it; the task, then, is to produce new concepts "worthy" of thinking the Earth today.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari appropriate a whole vocabulary of geological terms to bring new concepts out of the Earth. Saldanha writes that "Deleuzian thinking does not aim to secure permanent laws of its own functioning" (p.7). Thinking is instead *groundless*. However, Saldanha explains, "[e]ven if the ground beneath our feet moves continually while we think it into being, it is a ground nevertheless, not an infinite abyss" (p.12). That is, it is through its excavation of the Earth for new concepts that we can continuously rebuild the always shifting ground of thought.

"Understanding immanence as planar, as something to construct while travelling through it," Saldanha explains, "allows Deleuze to stay clear from the grounding of thought in a pregiven transcendental subject" (p.144). Instead it is through an immanent geophilosophy of desire that we can rethink a world constantly undergoing change, a world constantly coming together and coming undone. "Grounding philosophy immanently in the earth helps rethink the bodies, networks, environments, mappings, institutions, public squares, and battles that are usually gathered under the term 'politics'" (p.36). Saldanha helpfully unearths a Deleuzian geophilosophy by exploring some of these geologically-inflected concepts that might help geographers with this task: the four-dimensional strata through which enduring arrangements gain consistency; the phyla that cut across all existing strata; the "ultimate horizon" of the mechanosphere that feeds into every existing assemblage.

Through this ungrounding and re-grounding of thought through the Earth, Deleuze and Guattari develop fully immanent and fully materialist ontology. Saldanha argues it is Deleuze who is best positioned to help us develop a ground of thought worthy of the event of the Anthropocene. Thinking in terms of "strata", "phyla" and "ultimate horizon" makes it possible to take into account the immense more-than-human movements that comprise a

planet constantly undergoing change and crisis.

Re-engagement with the Virtual

This leads to a second major contribution of Saldanha's book: he encourages a re-engagement with the often sidelined "virtual" aspects of space and its extant sociomaterial forms. An ongoing problem for geographers has been how to think space immanently without reverting to a depoliticised flat ontology. In this vein one of the recent criticisms of assemblage analyses in geography is their tendency to focus on the actually-existing material arrangements of assemblages, particularly assemblage-inflected work in urban studies (see Buchanan 2017). While this kind of analysis has been good at offering new understandings of how things hold together across diverse and often surprising spatialities, it often fails to address questions of why *this* particular arrangement came to be rather than any other; it misses the effects of power that lead to the emergence of *this* actual world. To answer this, we must look beyond the material itself.

The "virtual" is how Deleuze explains perceived structure through immanence. Saldanha writes that while everything ultimately operates on what Deleuze and Guattari call the plane of immanence, "these observable and measurable phenomena are only the actual realities brought forth by an underlying virtual diagram or map" (p.119-120). Saldanha describes this most clearly in the book's third major section, "Places". He explains that some arrangements attempt to "transcend" the plane of immanence and produce a "plane of organisation", comprised of pre-existing plans or diagrams which then concrete assemblages respond to and fulfil. These plan(e)s, he writes, "shape a chunk of reality according to a predetermined plan" (p.146). The virtual, then, is comprised of the abstract arrangements that "guide" the emergence of concrete assemblages: from bodies to cities to geopolitical arrangements.

In this way, Deleuze performs a kind of reversal of Platonism. Rather than the transcendental supervening the actual, the transcendental *arises* from the immanent. The plane of immanence and plane of organisation are coextensive, but the former is actual while

the latter is virtual. In this way he produces an ontology capable of capturing the virtual aspects behind sociomaterial forms. The urban grid, automobile dominance, the nation-state, heteronormativity, and so on–these seemingly immutable forms arise through individual actualisations of virtual but always immanent plans. In the third and fourth sections of the book, "Places" and "Maps", Saldanha explicates Deleuze's many conceptual tools through which we might apprehend these virtual diagrams: the lines of rigid or supple segmentarity that distinguish this territory from that; the abstract machines that guide the emergence of assemblages; faciality that places all bodies within existing categories; the cartographies through which the virtual is mapped.

Commitment to Progressive Politics

And last, Saldanha's account continually emphasises the political grounds and implications of Deleuze's ideas. He explains that Deleuze and Guattari's work was always concerned with questions of power. As Saldanha writes, "Deleuze's ethical and ontological commitments are almost indistinguishable" (p.94), meaning it's somewhat disingenuous to separate his philosophical from his radical commitments.

But he notes geographers have not been as quick to take up these political aspects of Deleuze's project, and Saldanha has been a vocal critic of the widespread depoliticisation of French theory in geography. Responding to a recent paper on what the authors described as Guattari's "impracticality" (Gerlach and Jellis 2015), for instance, Saldanha writes, "Guattari was throughout explicitly devoted to critiquing the subjection to capital and the state and to conceiving new revolutionary tactics" (2015 152). If anything, their work was a call to arms founded in a radical ontology of difference.

Deleuze's political project is explored most explicitly in the second section, "Flows", which asks how difference is distributed unequally. Understanding movement as primary (which further works to unground our thought), the concepts in this section provide means through which to think the differential movements of materials, signs, and bodies. All matter of territory–places, events, bodies–are kinds of spatial thickenings that occur only through the

conjunction of selected flows of matter and signs. Deleuze argues it is only through momentary stabilisations of flows that seemingly durable structures emerge, including markets, capital, and capitalism more generally. Saldanha explains that Deleuze and Guattari's political economy demonstrates "how capital penetrates, dismantles, and conjoins all other flows and meanings so it can keep on flowing and growing" (p.75). These successive movements of deterritorialisation result in reterritorialisations that work towards the ends of capital accumulation. But this process is never neat nor complete. Rather like David Harvey (2017) has argued, capital must continuously and hastily bandaid over its rapidly proliferating errors and contradictions to maintain its relentless expansion.

But while capitalism emerges through these deterritorialising movements, it is undone in much the same manner. Deleuze and Guattari develop a whole array of radical concepts to perceive that which exceeds the territorialisations of capital. They were particularly interested in people occupying the urban peripheries and others excluded from the spaces and processes of capital. Nomads, war machines, combat, ghettos–these are the flows of bodies, signs, matter and tactics that pull at the edges of capital processes; those peoples and practices that still largely escape the powerful striations of capitalism, producing their own smooth spaces in which other things become possible. The Deleuzian political project, then, is to produce a people-to-come: "a passage through the earth, not a rooting in the soil" (p.66). As Deleuze and Guattari explain in *What is Philosophy*: "Revolution is absolute deterritorialization even to the point where this calls for a new earth, a new people" (2014: 101).

Building the Ground Beneath Our Feet

It's becoming increasing difficult to ignore the fact that the ground is always moving beneath our feet. Oceans are rising, atmospheres are warming, soils are changing, and the whole social world feels it's in slow upheaval. But as Saldanha writes, though the ground beneath our feet is always shifting, it is still a ground and not a bottomless abyss.

Saldanha argues that it is a specifically Deleuzian kind of thinking that offers geographers the best tools to think through the complexity and messiness of our times:

opening up rather than shutting down analyses, tending towards complexity rather than simple reduction. Deleuze reminds us at every turn that we must shatter the illusion of coherence. We must dig beneath the ground only to build another.

The strength of Saldanha's new book is that he draws out an impressive array of Deleuze's concepts that might help us with this task. While Saldanha's writing isn't always less obtuse than Deleuze and Guattari's, he provides a more straightforwardly organised and spatial account of their work. In choosing "breadth over depth" (p.5), as he readily admits, Saldanha has done much of the grunt work in sifting through Deleuze's corpus (and much of Guattari's) to develop a fairly systematic account of concepts geographers of all kinds will likely find provocative and useful in their writing of the earth. This is not intended to be an unquestioned authority on the meaning and use of these concepts: "They are more like creases in the map of trajectories of thinking, possible openings that have to be further developed, combined, or discarded" (p.5). Never leading to any certain conclusions, the purpose of this conceptual tramping is instead to provoke us to think space differently.

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