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# Sonic Geographies of Shifting Bodies

By Candice Boyd & Michelle Duffy

#### Abstract

In this article we take up some of the challenges presented by non-representational theory (Anderson & Harrison 2010; Boyd, forthcoming); in particular, that offered by Nigel Thrift's leitmotif of movement – 'of living as a succession of luminous or mundane instants ... of movement as a desire for a presence which escapes a consciousness-centred core of self-reference' (2008, p7). In response, we offer two alternate styles of rhythmanalysis based on an experimental work that explores the sonic geographies of shifting bodies. In doing so, we consider the habits of bodies in order to think on the intimate relationship between body, habit, subjectivity, and what it may give rise to in terms of 'a politics of what happens' (Thrift 2008, p2).

Our starting point is that of the body and habits. Habits comprise rhythmic sequences – pulse, heartbeat, breath, talking, gesturing, walking, eating, digesting and a myriad of other sequences that keep us going and keep us *moving* even at these imperceptible levels. Yet such rhythmic states are not merely structuring space-time into repeated and monotonous acts. As music theorist Christopher Hasty points out, "rhythm focuses our attention, not on time as a substrate or medium of events, but on the events themselves in their particularity, creativity and spontaneity" (1997, p7). Regular repetition in this sense is more than a rigid and constricted pattern or proportion of time. The ways in which we experience repetitive rhythms, i.e., that we feel these as soundwaves with our whole body, leads us to try and make sense of this experience in terms of a pulse. This is significant to an embodied geography of place; our bodily and cognitive response serve to interpellate the human body into place, a rhythmic attunement that helps in 'forging body-space relationships' (Duffy et al 2011, p 17). Using rhythmanalysis as a tool, we contemplate the way in which bodies, habits and rhythms constitute the 'social', and how even the most banal of bodily movements speak to our sense of being in the world and the body's capacity to act.

In many ways the principles and methods of rhythmanalysis we draw on in our work resonate with theories of non-representational geography. Proponents of non-representational theory advance a cause and desire for a form of social analysis which embraces 'more-than' the terminations and operations of representational knowledge (Lorimer 2008). Non-representational theory highlights the failures of representational thinking to understand the palpable relevance of 'thought-in-action' as the foreground (rather than the background) of our lives. In non-representational research there is a focus on movement, action, and practice – the dynamic way that affect is folded within and between objects, spaces, and things (Thrift 2004). As radical constructivists, non-representational theorists go beyond social constructivism in sharing an approach to meaning and value as 'thought-in-action' (Anderson & Harrison 2010). As Dewsbury puts it:

The non-representational argument comes into its own in asking us to revisit the performative space of representation in a manner that is more attuned to its fragile constitution ... For me, the project of non-representational theory then, is to excavate the empty space between the lines of representational meaning in order to see what is also possible. The representational system is not wrong: rather, it is the belief that it offers complete understanding – and that *only it* offers any sensible understanding at all – that is critically flawed (2003, p.1911)

Thus, non-representational theorists not only assert that all human life is based on and in movement, but that this movement captures the joy of living and an attitude towards life as potential. As such, the stream of activity that constitutes the social is seen to be constantly moving and changing. Within the 'assemblages of life', there is a kind of joint action between things and spaces which makes them inseparable from each other. As such, non-representational theories trade in modes of perception which are not individualised or subject-based (Thrift, 2008). It is this slippery nature of embodied geographies that is the focus of our empirical work.

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# ISSUE 2 PHOTO CREDIT

Graham Gussin; I Love It, In Space there Are No Limits, I Love It.; 2001; Photo courtesy of the artist.

A series of six wall drawings using sound as source material. Sound is put through a software program that translates it into image, producing a kind of audio map or territory, this is then projected onto a given wall and traced, the background for these pieces is an oil based blue ink. The sounds used are words spoken by participants in various pornographic films, the brief sentences becoming the title of the work.

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#### Sonic geography and methodology

There is a growing body of literature that aims to translate affective and non-representational perspectives on space and place into research methods. Of note are the work by Latham (2003), Laurier and Philo (2006) on café spaces, Wood and Smith's (2004) research on musical performance, and Morton's (2005) work on Irish music sessions. Laurier and Philo's (2006) research draws particular attention to the necessary aporia – or 'insurmountable impasse' – that faces researchers who attempt to capture and communicate situated, embodied knowledges. Using a verbal café encounter as the basis of their analysis, they argue that all encounters, great or small, can elucidate our understandings of the socio-logics of our world. In particular, they emphasise that ordinary encounters in ordinary places are rich 'ethno-archaeological ground' for geographical research. Similarly, Wood and Smith (2004) argue, through Thrift, that performance is fundamentally a geographical act and that it is what 'what individuals do' that constitutes the vibrancy of life. The implication for empirical work is an imperative to expose the affective content of tacit knowledges' – ways and forms of knowing that 'active, practical and sensory' (2004, p.535).

This embodied methodological stance is articulated in the research of Morton (2005). In her paper, Morton argues that expressive, embodied and affective engagements characterise a performative approach to ethnography, which aims to understand how space and place are constituted 'in the now'. Conventional methods often fail to capture these dimensions of human performance. In her study of Irish music sessions in the city of Galway, Morton utilizes audio recordings, spoken diaries, photography, video and participatory interviews to 'evoke the events and the sense of liveness that took place' during the sessions (p668). She concludes that a performative approach to ethnography provides access to affective and expressive ways of knowing that are often neglected by researchers themselves. She endorses non-representational approaches for what they give to the researcher's experience – that is, the ability to 'feel, hear and experience [the] difference'. In our own empirical work, we have attempted to do the same.

In public life we have learned to ignore the sensations of the body in the modern defence of the subject/object distinction (Brennan 2004; Rorty 1979). We fail to identify and interpret the communications of 'the flesh' because we are always struggling "... either to subdue them, or communicate with a slower, thicker person who calls itself I" (Brennan, 2004, p140). Our subject-centred viewpoint is prejudiced against the body. We have released language from other ways of knowing by inserting the subject in place of the body. We have divorced the visual sense from the others in order to construct images which are capable of being reflected upon. Yet, sensory knowledge, particularly of a non-visual nature, does not lend itself so easily to this process. As Brennan states:

It is only when we depend on visual perception that we are led astray into the subjective thought that takes the human standpoint as central. Such thought requires that one stand apart to observe the other and reduce it to predictable motions and reactions, the better to study it as an object (2004, p150).

And herein lies the challenge of nonrepresentational modes of inquiry – we are seeking to explore embodied dispositions, the non-cognitive world that takes up much of our daily, human life (Thrift, 2008). Our approach to this complexity is to place ourselves between the mundane, the rhythmic, the non-cognitive, and a series of bodily registers, that is to use our own bodies as 'instruments of research' (Longhurst *et al.* 2008). Hence our approach in this project seeks to move into the relations between bodies and rhythms. While an ethnographic framework can tell us much about bodies in space, it remains nonetheless a cognitive process; its focus is on what can be articulated through language. What we are pursuing in our non-representational framework is what Thrift (2008) calls "a set of embodied dispositions ... action-oriented 'representations' which simultaneously describe aspects of the world and prescribe possible actions" (2008, p58). In addition, and as many of those working in this area are also doing, we are thinking through the affective and intuitive processes that constitute self and place – that is, how we know place experientially. This approach means capturing the between-ness of bodies and space.

## Rhythmanalysis of a student café

We would like to suggest that the reader start the audio playback at this point in the paper and listen to the recording while reading the rhythmanalyses

## Setting the scene

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editor@interferencejournal.com www.interferencejournal.com Interference Journal CTVR / Room 3.19 Dunlop Oriel House Trinity College Dublin 2 Ireland It is the middle of the day in a crowded café at the Victorian College of the Arts at Southbank in Melbourne, Australia. Our prior experience as visitors to this space prompted us to choose it as the location of this study: as a performing arts school, and unlike other cafés it is an animated space where students demonstrate dance steps to each other or flamboyantly burst into song at impromptu moments. We seat ourselves in the midst of this commotion, trying to look natural despite the visibility of the large microphone and digital recorder that we've placed under the table (refer to Figure 1). It either goes unnoticed or is not considered anything unusual in a college that is dedicated to the study of production and performance. We sit quietly, gesturing to each other without speech, jointly scribbling down preliminary thoughts on a piece of paper before mapping out the space that we have entered into as interlopers.

In and through this space, bodies connect, weave together, dissipate, move out and move on. Trapped birds flap around unnoticed while human voices warble, giggle, and rise above the scraping of chairs against the concrete floor, the rustle of clothing, the chink of glasses, and the shuffling of feet. People are constantly orienting and re-orienting themselves to each other and the earth. Someone belches loudly. This sound blends seamlessly with the gaggle of laughter and the thumping of the music from the speaker mounted in the far corner of the room. Yet even within and on the margins of this apparent chaos and movement, the *habits* of bodies give rise to a rhythmic shaping of the cafe, such that each of us comes to differentially *inhabit* this space with other bodies – jostling in the coffee queue, joining or leaving groups at the tables, brushing past as we move through the passageway that weaves around – linking entrance and exit.

In what follows, we present two distinct forms of rhythmanalysis offered as a means to read across and along with the ethnographic setting depicted above. In undertaking this analysis, we take as our starting point the work of Henri Lefebvre (2004), in which he argues that one should start with abstract concepts so as to arrive at an understanding of the concrete – hence rhythm is the tool not the object of the analysis. The rhythmanalyst is pre-visionary, uses the body to 'hear', embroils him or herself in the site of exchange, and hears sound as meaningful and not just noise; 'He (sic) thinks with his body, not in the abstract, but in lived temporality' (Lefebvre 2004, p21). Attention to rhythm, then, is an attention to a sense of impact and change between things.

The first rhythmanalysis presented maps out the sounds and movement that arise within this space in relation to the body of the researcher. Fragments of conversation float in and through the space, punctuated by transactions of money for coffee, sandwiches and cakes, and the shuffling/stomping of feet as people seek out a place to sit, and all combined to create what Deleuze described as 'a kind of melodic line of continuous variation' (1988, p49). In a second refrain, a more conceptual rhythmanalysis is offered. In this case, the text's rhythm as presented on the page corresponds to the weaving of bodies, movement and space present within the café. Both rhythmanalyses are then followed by a theoretical interpretation that seeks to bring together these experiential and theoretical threads in order to demonstrate that the work of the rhythmanalyst must '...simultaneously catch a rhythm and perceive it as a whole' (Lefebvre, 1992, p21). Our aim in these rhythmanalyses is to bring these various rhythms and their relations into presence, an attempt to 'know' the 'unknowable', motivated by a firm conviction that it is these qualities of the world which matter the most and make it lively (Boyd, forthcoming; Lorimer, 2005).



OUR MAPPING OF THE CAFÉ SPACE

## A spatial-poetic rhythmanalysis



# Spatial-conceptual rhythmanalysis (mind bodyspace)

Many things about the micro-politics of this space speak to the mundane, pre-conscious and collective experiences of the "public everyday". There is joy in the café as bodies come into presence (see Nancy, 1993). Actions as well as thoughts are being practiced in this social context. Social relationships - via students' meeting and greeting between classes - are carried and temporally stabilised on waves of laughter. Voices strain and rise above the vibrancy of the space in diasporic crescendos and decrescendos, creating a vital symphony. 'Dead matter' comes alive when joined by the thumping, stamping, and scraping of shifting bodies. The social space of the café is an apparent cacophony of sound, rhythm, habit and a series of 'bodily knowledges'. People in this space react and respond to each other through the precognitive employment of sound, which in rare instances becomes an outburst of song. Transposed relationships break into or transgress this space in such a way that it is 'reinscribed with utterances outside that of the symbolic law of codified space' (Duffy 2005, p687). This is a re-marking of space where 'territorialisation is an act of rhythm that has become expressive (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p315). These expressive qualities of rhythm mark out the subject, creating spatialised identities, 'not in the sense that these qualities belong to a subject, but in the sense that they delineate a territory that will belong to the subject that carries or produces them' (1987, p316).

## Interpretations

A first listen to our audio recording may seem to deliver up nothing more than noise – the clear burst

of song in amongst a low murmuring of indistinguishable voices accompanied by a deep constant boom, with an occasional snatch of conversation. Yet, upon closer attention, we can follow the tracings of affect through these different sounds, tracking their movement as they move between and through the space, materialities and bodies of the café. In this framework, therefore, we understand affect as the 'energetic outcome of encounters between bodies in particular places' (Conradson & Latham 2007, p232). Such energetic outcomes constitute affective fields, 'temporary configurations of energy and feeling that arise but then dissipate, before perhaps being re-animated elsewhere' (lbid, p238). Affective atmospheres can be thought of as being both palpable and ethereal at the same time (McCormack 2008). Moreover, affective energy is contagious – 'it spreads, sometimes like wildfire' (Thrift 2008, p235) – as we can see depicted in the various lines of sound, most obvious in the earworm-like movement of fragments of a song that are picked up by one person and continued by another, but also in the footsteps that form a musical ground of those moving from door to fridge to bain-marie to cash register until finally finding a spare seat amongst friends. This affective contagion can be regarded as an energetic flow that brings together hormonal fluxes, bodies, and shared rhythms to produce an encounter between the body and a particular event (Thrift 2008).

Sound is an integral component of this affective contagion as it offers a focus on the experiential ways that bodies and place intertwine and co-constitute one another. One important way in which sound (and more specifically music) operates is that it taps into our affective, emotional and intuitive selves, and this opens up a means through which to examine how affect and emotion influence social interactions (Duffy et al 2011; DeNora 2000; Juslin and Sloboda, 2001; Smith, 2000). Sound alters our perception of places and of others because it demonstrates the continuity and discontinuity of our subjectivity; we are immersed in its sounds and can either be drawn into its 'participatory discrepancies, [which] gives [us] that participation consciousness' (Keil & Feld1994, p.22), or we can feel alienated, separate, even violated. Hence, the capacity of the body to sense rhythm, and our affective and emotional responses to this, has a role in the emergence of processes that regulate the dynamics of social interaction. As Lefebvre argues, the creation of a space through sound "presupposes a unity of time and space, an alliance" (Lefebvre 2004, p.60), which he suggests occurs in and through this rhythmic framework. The rhythms encountered in the everyday, because of the ways in which they can give coherence to the unfolding of time-space, anchor the everyday, lived time of those present. Yet, the affective connections made in and through rhythm and associated bodily movement are only one way of constituting a sense of being in place. Bodily affectivity and the body's capacity to act also operate within more intimate but nonetheless threshold spaces between the body and what is beyond the body's borders.

When the body shifts, two things happen: one is the actual event of motility, and the other is the energetic, incorporeal intensity, anticipation, and suspense of potential action. Between the two is the middle ground of visceral perception, which Massumi (2002) calls *mesoperception* or sensation – the body's registering of the 'inbetween-ness' of an incorporeal event. Massumi (2002) asks 'what if the body is inseparable from dimensions of *lived abstractness* that cannot be conceptualized in other than topological terms?' (2002, p177). Thinking about the way the body uses proprioception to orientate itself to the earth without conscious thought, so-called 'dead reckoning', challenges our understandings of space. Space is experienced though movement, and position emerges from movement. We always find ourselves inside of this experience, because we are always *in* movement. As many have argued, bodies and the spaces they inhabit are inseparable (Duffy *et al.* 2011; Lefebvre 2004; Edensor 2010; Merleau-Ponty 1962). Further, as Merleau-Ponty posited, the body is not in space and time, it 'belongs' to it, that is, it combines and includes with space/time.

These ideas lead on to our attempt at a spatial-conceptual rhythmanalysis, one that draws on the Deleuzo-Guattarian notion of de-stratification, to think about the ways in which the social space of the café space is produced beyond, below and alongside the subject. In this second example, the rhythmanalysis has been produced in the 'shape' of an abstract machine (see Protevi 2009, p102); where it is intended that the reader struggle to make sense of the text while drawing in the spatial references to mind, body and space introduced through the text's vertical movement. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), destratification is a process that increases complexity by allowing consistencies or assemblages to emerge transversally. This consistency or assemblage is a functional whole that 'preserves the heterogeneity of its component parts and enables further rhizomatic connections (positive affects as increase in *puissance*), as opposed to a stratum, which relies on the homogeneity of components (Protevi 2009, p102). In the second rhythmanalysis we have reflected – via a performative manipulation of the text – on the ways in which shifting bodies, habits, rhythms, and their sounds come together to create an affective space (or an assemblage) which of itself is inseparable from the actors who spontaneously generated it.

### Implications and conclusions

As researchers, we have 'born witness' to the social by immersing ourselves in the sounds of this site (Dewsbury,2003; 2010). The sounds collected are not simply a background to the (visual, social) world. We hear this space differently by listening back to our recording than what we did by being a part of it in real time, and our use of sound is significant to the development of a non-representational

methodology. Sound reminds us that we are very much connected to others and to the places we inhabit (Duffy et al. 2011). Sound also brings us back to our corporeality in the way that it penetrates in and through the body (Kahn 1996). What we have sought to do in this exercise is to work through the fleeting moments of an everyday space. Our methodological focus of rhythmanalysis offers a means to explore the ways in which bodies, space and habit come together is offered that moves beyond human cognition or individual consciousness.

Instead, what we have provided is an 'empiricism of sensation' (Clough 2009, p51), through which we can examine affect and the sociality of transmitted forces across bodies. Sound, rhythm, movement are heard at the limits of perception and yet the space and those inhabiting it are 'being affected-affecting' (Anderson 2006, p735), as we can observe in the sonic rhythms and melodic shifts moving from person to person across the cafe. The application of Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts has enabled us to further think through the ways in which habit, sound, rhythm and bodies constitute place in moments of time (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). This second rhythmanalysis further relies on the idea that nature incarnates an abstract machine through processes of stratification and de-stratification (Protevi, 2009) and, as such, illustrates the way in which mind, body, and space are multiple constituents of 'the social'.

By immersing ourselves exclusively in the recorded sounds of this space (as you as reader have now done), we are able to shift our thinking about the constitution of place and the micro-politics that are generated – beyond, above and alongside the subject (Protevi, 2009). We are able to appreciate some of the ways that the body and its sensations are always ahead of our reflective consciousness. When we bear witness to an event in real time, we are chained to our visual sense; when we think only through sound our attention shifts. Exploration of habit through the sounds of shifting bodies is not simply a body unconsciously 'remembering' movement through space. What we have proposed in this paper is that sound allows us to trace affective relations and their impact on the constitution of place. Through the interactions mediated by sound, rhythm and habit, we can begin to uncover the politics of the 'unthinking' social world.

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### Bio

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