

[Experimental Geography in Practice](#)

exploring correspondences between geographic research and experimental and artistic practices, initiated by Merle Patchett

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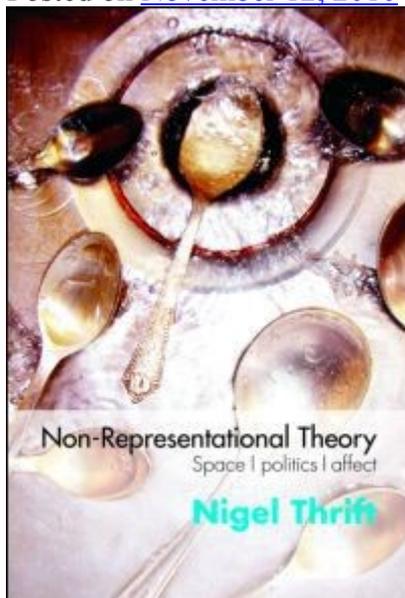
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[**A Rough Guide to Non-Representational Theory**](#)

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'Non-Representational Theory': A manifesto for changing the direction and methods of social science

There is increasing interest in practice and performance in cultural geography. Attempts to move beyond issues of representation and re-focus cultural geographic concerns on performativity and bodily practices are linked to the inception of what Nigel Thrift describes as 'non-representational theory or the theory of practices' (Thrift 1996, 1997, 2000a, 200b). According to Thrift, the non-representational project is concerned with describing 'practices, mundane everyday practices that shape the conduct of human beings towards others and themselves in particular sites' (1997: 142). Rather than obsess over representation and meaning, Thrift contends that non-representational work is concerned with the performative 'presentations', 'showings' and 'manifestations' of everyday life (1997: 142).

While Thrift has profitably drawn on theorists such as Benjamin, Deleuze and de Certeau in an attempt to shed light on the more embodied, intangible aspects of everyday life, broader moves in cultural geography to engage 'more actively with the heterogeneous entanglements of practice' have their antecedents in diverse intellectual currents (Latham and Conradson 2003: 1901).

These range from:

- a heightened sensitivity to the fleshy realities of the human body and how taking the body seriously introduces phenomenological registers that exceed representation (e.g. Anderson and Smith 2001; Harrison 2000; Longhurst 1997; McCormack 2002; McDowell 1997; Rodaway 1994; Thrift and Dewsbury 2000; Valentine 1999),
- to work on nonhuman and 'more-than-human' geographies that has pushed for a reconsideration of how the social is emplaced within the materiality of the world (e.g. Hinchliffe 1999; Murdoch 1997, 1998, 2001; Thrift 1996, 2000a, 2000b, 2005; Whatmore 1997, 2002, 2004, 2006),
- and a rereading of poststructuralist theory which places much greater emphasis on the productive (and often disruptive) capacities of the material (e.g. Amin and Thrift 2002; Hetherington and Lee 2000; Law 2000; Jackson 2000; Philo 2000; Pels et al 2002; Kearns 2003, Anderson 2004, Anderson and Wylie 2009).

Non-representational theory has therefore become, according to Hayden Lorimer, 'an umbrella term for diverse work that seeks to better cope with our self-evidently more-than-human, more-than-textual, multisensual worlds' (Lorimer 2005: 83).

While the aims and parameters of the non-representational project have become increasingly difficult to pin down since its original inception – and even within those purporting to do NRT 'proper' there is much debate (e.g. Thrift and Dewsbury 2000; Harrison 2000; Gregson and Rose 2000; Dewsbury et al 2002; Whatmore 2002; Latham 2003; Anderson 2004; McCormack 2005; Anderson and Harrison 2006; Thrift 2008) – what unites these diverse research efforts is the argument for a more democratic relationship between conceptual and empirical work. Alan Latham, for example, argues that the turn towards the cultural in geography has had limited impact upon the ways in which geographers actually do empirical research, and that furthermore there was increasing dissatisfaction with the strange gap between theory and empirical practice which seemed to characterise much of the work produced by the 'new' cultural geography project (2003: 1991).

While I would qualify that the early 'cultural turn' (c. late 80's early-90s) was deeply tied up with methodological innovation, introducing all kinds of qualitative procedures and sensibilities only scantily present in the discipline hitherto (e.g. see Pred 1986, 1990a, 1990b, 1995; McDowell and Court 1994; McDowell 1995; 1997) the problem, for many, lay in the fact that the new cultural geography was obsessively built upon the politics of representation where, according to Thrift, the symbolic is emphasised over and above the 'responsive and rhetorical' and practice is therefore downplayed (Thrift 2000a: 223). The issue identified by Thrift and others (see for example Whatmore 2002), according to Paul Harrison (Harrison 2000: 499), 'is the inability of knowledge in social analysis to do anything other than hold onto, produce, represent, the fixed and the dead; a failure to apprehend the lived present as an open-ended and generative process; as practice'.

To counter-act this 'embalming obsession' with representation and meaning in which 'events are drained for the sake of orders, mechanisms, structures and processes' (Dewsbury et al 2002: 438), calls were therefore made for methods that 'co-produce' the world (Thrift 2000b: 5; see also Dewsbury et al 2002, Whatmore 2002; 2006, Latham 2003). Therefore, rather than seek after explanations that claim to go beyond what is being described, the aim became, according to Latham (2003: 1903), 'simply to present descriptions that are infused with a certain fidelity to what they describe'. Dewsbury (2003: 1923) calls this stance a kind of 'witnessing', a stance that is orientated towards being 'in tune to the vitality of the world as it unfolds'.

The imperative to inject life into the 'dead geographies' of representation has asked difficult and provocative questions about what is intended by the conduct of research (Thrift and Dewsbury 2000). However while non-representational currents of thought in geography have questioned much of the methodological toolkit available for geographical fieldwork – in particular in-depth interviews, focus groups and participant observation which accentuate contemplative and interpretative modes of thought – a sustained engagement with how NRT can reconfigure the collection of fieldwork has as yet failed to fully materialise. At best these are expressions to 'move beyond' linguistic forms of expression, by favouring adapted versions of deep ethnographic work offering the best way to 'get at' the more intangible aspects of practices; works that show a 'willingness to experiment with established, indeed quite traditional, methods to create innovative, insightful methodological hybrids' (Latham 2003: 1993). Latham's use of montage (the juxtaposition of different research methods to produce methodological hybrids that inhabit different time-spaces) could therefore be said to characterise attempts to address the virtual multiplicity of the non-representational world. Doel and Clarke have gone as far to suggest that 'montage is the essential gesture of non-representational styles of thought and action' (Doel and Clarke 2007: 899).

Yet methodological pluralism is not entirely new in geography. Feminist currents of thought in geography have long emphasised the need for creative and inclusive methods, arguing that the standardisation of methods is inappropriate (Kingdon 2003; Parr 2007). Feminism in geography, both in theory and practice, has long privileged relational modes of knowing, such as 'non-hierarchical interaction, mutual learning and empathetic understanding' (Jones 1997: xv). Similarly, those who can be thought of as developing 'more-than-human' modes of working have argued that researchers must supplement the familiar repertoire of humanist methods (which generate text and talk) 'with experimental practices that amplify other sensory, bodily and affective registers and extend the company and modality of what constitutes a research subject' (Whatmore 2004: 1362; see also Thrift 2005; Lorimer 2006, in press). Whatmore is notable for drawing inspiration from the research practices of science

studies – as elaborated by Latour (1999), Stengers (1997) and Law (2004) – to commit to research as a co-fabrication or ‘working together’ with the worldly phenomena enjoined in the research process (Whatmore 2006; see also 2002).

According to Lorimer’s most recent review of the state of non-representational research, we are left with a theory that ‘works best as a background hum, asking questions of style, form, technique and method, and ushering in experimental kinds of response’ (and hence why some find better fit with his alternative prefix of ‘more-than-’) (Lorimer 2008: 6).

NB. This extract is taken from my thesis:

Patchett, M. (2010) [Putting Animals on Display: Geographies of Taxidermy Practice](#), Enliven: University of Glasgow.