Non-Representational Approaches to Body–Landscape Relations
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Abstract
This short paper offers a critical summary of some of the key themes of non-representational theory (NRT), with a particular focus on recent approaches to body-landscape relations and the potential place of disability in these accounts. NRT in British human geography has encouraged an emphasis on the embodied, practiced and habitual qualities of embodied experience. Recent non-representational work on landscape has developed these agendas to show how landscape may be thought of as a ‘process’ (Rose 2002) or ‘tension’ which potentially ‘animates’ the embodied subject (Rose and Wylie 2006). Here the body and the landscape are understood to be complementary concepts that are useful to think through together – each in a constant process of ‘becoming’ through the other. This paper reflects on the methodological challenges of researching such non-representational body-landscape relations, showing how researchers have drawn on insights of disciplines as diverse as neuroscience and performance studies to address this challenge.

Introduction
This paper provides a critical summary of some recent non-representational work and its contribution to our understandings of body-landscape relations. This is a bold, even paradoxical aim, given that non-representational theory (NRT) discourages prescriptive approaches to research and encourages context-dependent conceptualization! However, this review may be useful for those researchers who are new to the term ‘non-representational’ and are wondering why I have placed hyphen between the terms ‘body’ and ‘landscape’ in the title of this paper and recent writing on landscape and visual impairment (Macpherson 2009a,b). Therefore, first, I will briefly outline some of the key elements of NRT. Second, I outline what a non-representational account of the body (including the disabled body) might involve. Third, I outline some recent approaches to conceptualizing and researching landscape and the ‘embodiment of landscape’ in the light of NRT (including my own work with specialist blind and visually impaired walking groups) and fourth, I think through some of the methodological challenges and responses that non-representational understandings of bodies and landscapes provoke.

What is NRT?
NRT is a term coined by British geographer Nigel Thrift (1996). He attaches this term to a set of philosophical work which places an emphasis on how space and time emerge through embodied practice. Thrift’s NRT encourages social scientists to re-evaluate their, supposedly heavy emphasis on representation, avoid solely ‘social constructionist’ accounts and move ‘… away from a view of the world based on contemplative models of thought.
and action toward theories of practice which amplify the potential flow of events’ (Thrift 2000b, 556). It is worth noting that the term ‘non-representational’ does not mean NRT is anti-representation nor does it deny that representation is significant, rather, NRT forces us to acknowledge how representation is not mimetic but is a form of ‘presentation’ (Dewsbury et al. 2002). For Lorimer (2005), ‘more-than representational’ would have been a better choice of the term, indicating how in NRT, the focus falls on how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions (Lorimer 2005, 84).

Whatever term is used to describe non-representational approaches, it is important to understand that many of the ideas that have fallen under the banner of NRT have complex lineages which stretch beyond geography’s more regular disciplinary remit. For example, Thrift draws on the post-structural work of writers such as Wittgenstein, Foucault, Deleuze and Haraway; the actor network theories of Latour, Law and Serres and on a range of writing on practice from the likes of Benjamin, De Certeau, Heidegger and Merleau–Ponty to outline and expand upon an agenda for non-representational ways of thinking and research (see timeline, Figure 1) (Thrift 1996, 1997, 1999, 2000a, 2003).

Thrift’s non-representational agenda has subsequently been elaborated and reworked by a range of writers in the discipline of geography (see, e.g. Dewsbury 2003; Dewsbury et al. 2002; Harrison 2000; Rose 2002; Wylie 2002) and researchers have taken inspiration from a whole raft of work based around metaphors of performance to outline and expand upon an agenda for non-representational ways of thinking and research (Dewsbury et al. 2002; Dewsbury and Naylor 2002; Crouch 2003; Latham 2003; Latham and Conradson 2003; Law and Urry 2004; Nash 2000). What might be broadly referred to as ‘non-representational approaches’ have also been utilized to engage with topics as diverse as race (Saldanha 2005; Tolia-Kelly 2006a,b), music (Smith 2000), dance therapy (McCormack 2002), walking (Wylie 2002) and gardening (Hitchings 2003). For a comprehensive review of the most recent non-representational research it is also worth looking at Lorimer’s (2005, 2007) reports in progress in human geography.

Fig. 1. Thrift’s (1999) ‘life-time-lines’ of non-representational theory.
This non-representational work has received a variable reception in the discipline, critiqued for not acknowledging other theories to which you might refer to as non-representational (Smith 2003), for risking a de-politicized, exclusive agenda (Thien 2005) and for embracing novelty for its own sake (Castree and Macmillan 2004). However, advocates of NRT argue that emotion, affect and the automatism of everyday life are significant arenas of ‘the political’ that require new methodological approaches and vocabularies to be understood better (Anderson and Harrison 2006; McCormack 2006). There is inevitably a certain complexity (and thus exclusivity) to such non-representational ideas and approaches. However, I think NRT also opens up valuable areas for researchers of landscape and the body. Specifically it draws attention away from considering bodies and landscapes as static, fixed or de-limitable entities and helps a move towards understanding the body and landscape as dynamic and dependent entities that can be usefully thought through together. As anthropologist Lee (2007, 89) states in his article, ‘Experiencing landscape; Orkney hill land and farming’,

One lesson [to be taken from non-representational approaches] is that landscape is not just a palimpsest...a historical layering in which the present is merely the sum of past episodes, but is also an active, present future-orientated engagement with the environment.

NRT and Body–Landscape Relations

I was initially drawn to NRT to help me think through some of the theoretical and conceptual challenges of conducting research with people with visual impairments who visit the British Countryside. Although non-representational ideas are not meant to offer a strict theoretical or conceptual framework (Thrift 1999, 394) in my own research NRT helped me to move debate around disability and landscape beyond the singular pursuit politics of representation and ‘giving voice’ to these under-represented visitors (Country-side Agency 2005), towards an understanding of the ways in which visually impaired visitors both produce and are produced through particular countryside spaces, social scenarios and research settings (Macpherson 2008b, 2009a,b). This is because in light of NRT (as well as other post-phenomenological and phenomenologically inspired accounts of the world) landscapes and bodies can be understood to emerge through their interactions with each other, rather than being free floating or objective ‘givens’. In such approaches, ‘... body and landscape are complementary terms: each implies the other, alternately as figure and ground’ (Ingold 2000, 193).

Such non-representational approaches to the body and landscape, alongside, feminist writing on the body (Grosz 1994; Probyn 2005) and writing within ‘new disability studies’ (Corker and Shakespear 2002; Thomas 1999) made me question what it meant to be situated in ‘the landscape’ and to ‘have’ a disabled body. In the following sections, I will explain further how NRT has aided a move towards a particular understanding of bodies and landscapes as interdependent processes.

The Body as a Process of Embodiment

NRT calls for a shift away from socially constructed or individualized medical models of the body (including the disabled body) towards a more complex understanding of the body as constantly in process. Here the body is not simply ‘flesh and bones’, an autonomous actor or the result of signification. Rather, the body is understood to be the reserve
of biological impulses and cultural–neurological habits (Connely 2002; Lakoff and Johnson 1999) emergent through its ‘interweavings’ with the world (Damasio 1999; Deleuze and Guttari 2004). As researchers this requires us to make a fundamental shift in how we think through the concept and materiality of the body, for attention is drawn to what a body can do and the process of embodiment. That is how the body takes shape through its interactions with other objects, bodies and landscapes.

This recent ‘non-representational’ approach to the body in geography is not just a reiteration of earlier humanistic geographer’s attempts to engage with phenomenology and ground understanding in the individual fleshy body (for such phenomenological approaches, see the work of: Grano 1929; Meinig 1979; Tuan 1979; Relph 1981; Porteous 1985; Porteous 1993; Seamon 1980; Seamon and Mugaerauer 1985). Rather in NRT our physical body and sensations are understood to be on the move, interconnected with other bodies and contexts. This means our sense of embodiment is dependant on how our body is put to use. The body in these accounts becomes hard to fix because, as Latour (2004, 206) writes ‘... to have a body is to learn to be affected, meaning “effectuated”, moved, put into motion by other entities, humans or non-humans’. Therefore in this formulation of embodiment there is no essential singular body, rather bodies and their differences come about through their interactions with the world: past, present and anticipated. Within this context the body can be understood as an ‘... interface that becomes more and more describable as it learns to be affected by more and more elements’ (Latour 2004, 207).

Interestingly, ‘social models’ of disabled experience (Oliver 1983) contain comparable understandings of how embodied experience may be understood as a process. For example, research on ‘disabling environments’ reveals the context-dependent nature of experiencing one’s body as disabled and how particular landscapes and attitudes can disable an individual (Swain et al. 1992). Here, just like in Latour’s description of embodiment, the experience of disability becomes more and more describable as the body comes into contact with and is potentially disabled by particular landscapes and social environments. In non-representational terms it may be possible to interpret such disabled forms of embodiment as ‘cumulative affects’ rather than solely biological givens.

Research that focuses specifically on people’s experiences of blindness and visual impairment, also has a tradition of engaging with understandings of embodiment as a process rather than as a given. Such research has built on Merleau-Ponty’s (1962, 3) phenomenology and his specific example of the blind man’s use of a cane and has drawn attention to the immersed, non-representational nature of embodied perception (Allen 2004; Cook 1992; Diderot 1999; Hetherington 2003; Hill 1985; Paterson 2006). For example, Hetherington’s (2003, 1938) work on visually impaired access to museums writes that ‘...humans do not act in an object world but are constituted as perceiving beings at the interface between subject and object’. This emphasis on how we are constituted at the interface with objects and environments rather than existing in separation from them complicates understandings of the body as a separate entity that acts out life on the surface of the earth. Rather our body and the sense that we have of our embodiment is understood as a process that always comes into being in conjunction with the landscape around us. This returns us to the quote from Ingold (2000, 193) ‘... body and landscape are complementary terms: each implies the other, alternately as figure and ground’.

In non-representational accounts of embodiment there is also an emphasis on how intuitions, habits and reflexes are a significant force in social life (Connely 2002; Damasio 1999; Varela 1999). This interest in the ‘pre-cognitive’ or intuitive element of life draws attention to recent neurobiological research that identifies a half-second delay between
the brain initiating an action and conscious sensation. This half-second delay means that the experience of consciousness as instantaneous is in fact a ‘user illusion’ (Norretranders 1999). Furthermore, to avoid cognitive overload only a limited amount of any particular experience will ever filter through fully to our consciousness, the rest we learn to ignore to focus effectively (Damasio 1999). Acknowledging a ‘user illusion’ compels researchers to accept that there is not always a reflective rational subject who is in control of what they are doing. Rather, people may respond to sub-conscious clues, act on intuition and may do things which they can provide no clear rationale for. This complicates social research based on self-reported accounts (Harrison 2006).

In the wake of such insights into the non-intentional or habitual elements of social life an increasing number of social and cultural theorists, including cultural geographers, are incorporating into their accounts work from neuroscience and physiology to develop a fuller account of socio-embodied life (Ahmed 2004; Bissell 2008; Connely 2002; Dewsbury 2003; Massumi 2002; Lakoff and Johnson 1999; McCormack 2007; Saldanha 2007; Varela 1999). Of course, it is foolish to extrapolate directly from any domain of inquiry to another. For example, biomedical sciences and neuroscience tend to be committed to a methodological individualism which risks returning us to a deflated conception of the body as a bounded biological entity. However, the fact that consciousness is not instantaneous has some very significant implications for the explanation of human behaviour in the discipline of geography. For example, in the case of landscape, the half-second delay between stimulus and response means that we are not simply confined to a culturally constructed set of ingrained, reflective responses to landscape, rather our individual embodied experience of landscape harbours the possibility of change of a different response. For Thrift (2004c), the half-second delay between stimulus and response is described as the space of the ‘simple living body’ or ‘bare life’. Significantly for an understanding of body-landscape relations he writes that,

…this fleeting space of the moment is utterly wrapped up with its context and most especially the object world...through the object world “we” are orientated to our surroundings and the body-object combination produces a carefully graded sense of the possibilities of any situation (Thrift 2004c, 152).

This means that our actions and conscious thoughts in any given environment maybe the result of pre-conscious thought shaped by the technologies and objects available; and the contexts and cues of a particular landscape. So objects available and physical landscape contexts are implicated in what the body is and what the body is likely to do in any given moment (see also Deleuze and Guttari 2004; Latour 2004; Grosz 1995; Latham and McCormack 2004). Such observations are clarified when placed in empirical context. For example, anthropologist Ingold (2004) writes a historical account of how, with the development of the technology of the shoe, people have been afforded differing movements through the landscape. Furthermore, work on the contemporary body highlights how the body continues to be constantly in formation, coming into being with its local environment and technologies rather than simply being or persisting (cf. Haraway’s 1991 ‘cyborgs’).

These ideas of the body as constantly in becoming, process or formation have important implications for how we might think about and categorize different bodies. Instead of thinking about bodies as relatively static or stable entities it is possible to think of them as performances that occur in conjunction with particular objects or contexts. For example, the raced body, the disabled body or the gendered body are all performed and come about in conjunction with other materials – be that a salwar kameez, a white cane
or a skirt. Although this term ‘performance’ risks implying that there is a mask overlaying the ‘real body’, non-representational work emphasizes how the regular performance of particular embodied roles results in them becoming a habitual and neurologically sedimented phenomenon. Habits formed in conjunction with particular materials become part of an embodied reality for participants – be that becoming raced through wearing particular garments or participating in certain activities or becoming visually impaired through carrying a white cane (Macpherson 2007; Saldanha 2007; Swanton 2008). Equally the landscape itself can be incorporated into this habitual process or performance of embodiment. Therefore, in the following section I will turn to recent non-representational literature on landscape and its contribution to our understanding of these body-landscape relations.

Non-Representational Landscapes

Landscape is an idea and a material space which has also has required considerable re-thinking in the light of NRT. In non-representational renderings of the concept, landscape, like the body, becomes understood as being a variably constituted ‘process’ (Rose 2002) or ‘event’ (Massey 2006) which ‘animates’ (Rose and Wylie 2006) and is constantly in formation. Landscape is no longer understood as simply being an inert background or setting for human action, nor is it understood as solely a pictorial or discursive form of representation. Rather, landscape is about ‘practice’ (Cresswell 2003) and comes into being by drawing variably on embodied, material and discursive domains. Such a non-representational approach to the landscape concept acknowledges the potential importance of the body in the constitution of landscape and the importance of landscape in the constitution of the body. This presents a significant departure from some of the earlier approaches to landscape in the cultural geography of the 1980s and 1990s which tended to conceive landscape solely in terms of representation and as an ideological ‘way of seeing’ (Cosgrove 1984, 1985; Daniels 1989; Daniels and Cosgrove 1993; Duncan and Duncan 1988).

A comprehensive review of all work on landscape that has built on non-representational approaches is beyond the remit of this short piece. However, I wish to identify a few key authors who have had a significant impact on, or are indicative of, the research and theoretical trajectories of landscape in recent years. In particular I will give consideration to the work of geographers Rose and Wylie (2006) who have been keen to advance and elaborate the non-representational agenda with ideas of landscape, culminating in a special issue of Environment and Planning D on ‘animating landscape’. I will then explore briefly some other recent approaches to researching landscape which have been influenced by NRT.

For Rose and Wylie, the challenge for landscape researchers is to recognize the ways in which landscape ‘animates’. They argue that landscape is irreducible to, but exists in complex relations with, both our individual sensuous engagements and discursive and ideological orders. Here they argue that the value of the landscape concept is that it helps gives depth to the ‘topological sensibilities’ and network forms of thinking pervasive in recent geographical theories. For them, landscape ‘...reintroduces perspective and contour; texture and feeling; perception and imagination’ (Rose and Wylie 2006, 477). In Rose and Wylie’s separate writings they diverge somewhat in their precise interpretations of the landscape concept. Wylie (2002, 2005, 2006a) has tended to focus most closely on the connections between landscape and the body, drawing on post-phenomenological literature to think through how our sense of being an embodied subject arises out of our sensuous engagement with the world. Wylie critiques ‘ocular-centric’ (Jay 1994) interpretations of
landscape and concerns himself with more embedded, mobile ways of seeing and experiencing landscape. He seeks to ‘...reconstruct theoretically the visual gaze upon the landscape by exploring the ontological processes ... which afford its actualization’ (Wylie 2006a, 522), defining landscape as ‘...the materialities and sensibilities with which we see’. (Wylie 2006a, 519).

However, although Wylie re-conceptualizes landscape in the wake of NRT and acknowledges the potential significance of the body in the sensuous in the formation of landscape, Rose (2006, 479) makes the important point that landscape also comes with the weight of numerous past associations. For Rose, the interesting thing about landscape is ‘...a fundamental inclination toward a metaphysics of presence’ (see also Rose 2004). What he appears to be getting at here is that although previously cultural geographers have analysed landscapes as systems of representation (what he refers to as ‘systems of presence’) landscape also signifies something broader about the human condition and our inclination to fix ideas, that is, ‘dream of presence’ despite the proceusal, constantly changing nature of existence. For Rose, dreams of presence ‘...are a means of attempting to hold onto the worlds that always eludes our grasp’ (545) and are ‘...indicative of an active desire to mark the world and orient becoming in the face of alterity and the anxious emptiness it presents’ (547). This inclination to fix or ‘dream of presence’ means that although theoretically landscapes may present us with a multitude of possibilities, only certain possibilities tend to be actualized. There is a tendency toward stasis. Thus, Rose calls for us to

... reorient the study of landscapes away from analysing landscapes as systems of presence to exploring them as dreams of presence; that is, as intimate collections of material sensations where other dreams of presence (dreams of who we are, of where we belong and of how we get on with life) are consigned (539).

Rose (2006) focuses on the closure of possibility in the landscape and our inclination to ‘fix’ ideas. This seems like an important turn for those involved with the non-representational study of bodies and landscapes for if we ignore this ‘fixing’ potential of landscape there is a danger that in the light of NRT, and other associated post-phenomenological theories, landscapes and bodies become re-conceptualized as areas of unbounded potential, excess and limitless becoming. A focus on fixing, stasis and the closure of possibility forces us to ask more politicized questions in the wake of NRT. Questions about why, in a world of potential and movement, do patterns of life become so sedimented and static? For Rose, ‘dreams of presence’ offers one way of conceptualizing an answer to this question, helping to explain stasis given the primacy of process, order out of chaos (cf. Massumi 2002, 9–10). However, although Rose’s approach may be useful I do not think we should stop at this point, or always confine ourselves to researching landscapes as ‘dreams of presence’.

A key insight of NRT is that landscape and the body are not fixed delimitable concepts that we can simply apply, but rather our ideas of them must change as they come into contact with empirical circumstance. Furthermore, there is a great diversity of other work on landscape that may be drawn upon to inspire our own accounts of landscape. For example, we may also wish to consider how landscape comes about as ‘a form of practice’ or the nature of landscape as a socio-ecological ‘event’ or ‘accomplishment’ that involves not only social, but ecological and geological timescales (Lorimer 2006; Massey 2006). All these ways of thinking about landscape require us to review our methodological approaches and reflect on how we present particular aspects of body-landscape relations. Therefore, in the final section of this paper I will outline some
Recent responses to the challenge of researching and writing through body-landscape relations.

*Researching and Representing Body–Landscape Relations*

Non-representational approaches to body-landscape relations help us to recognize that we are not simply rational actors in an inert landscape, but rather we are always in the process of formation with the landscape. What is interesting about such an understanding of the body-landscape is that it requires the ‘social’ researcher to give recognition to the agency of the material landscape and acknowledge that we may not always be carrying out conscious or reasoned actions within that landscape, while it has been argued that ‘…it is surprising what non-specialists can and do turn into words when ethnographies are conducted appropriately, in sufficient detail, with members of carefully chosen subject communities’ (Cloke et al. 2004, 189). Doing research in the light of NRT means we cannot simply ‘hoover up’ themes such as embodiment and the agency of objects from personal testimony. Body-landscape relations involve non-intentional action as well as subjective impression; therefore, interviews and self-reported accounts are inadequate if used as the sole source of information about the nature of body-landscape relations. In other words, there is no utterly subjective, socially constructed world; therefore, we need to attend to the agency of things as well as people (Clark 2003).

This is not to suggest that we should give up on interviewing altogether. Rather, I would argue, that it is important to reflect on the following issues when considering research on body-landscape relations; First, in the wake of recent insights from neuroscience into the nature of conscious perception, it is important to consider the ‘sphere of applicability’ of subjective testimony (Massumi 2002, 3). Second, it is important to consider the potential of landscape and the body to be otherwise to any such reported experience and third, it is important to reflect on the possibility that ‘unspeakable’ elements may be the most significant aspects of the research subjects or the researchers’ accounts of themselves (Harrison 2006). In these final paragraphs, I identify a number of researchers who have engaged with these issues when they practice forms of body-landscape research.

The possibility of non-intentional or subconscious human action means that it is important to attend to the sort of microkinetic knowledge which may not be contained within a traditional verbal account. Eric Laurier’s ethno-methodological work with video is exemplary in this regard. His use of video allows him to slow down, freeze and repeat events that might otherwise pass by conscious attention. Laurier does not directly address concepts of landscape or align himself fully with a non-representational agenda as it has been outlined by Thrift. However, his video work (often analysed and written about in conjunction with others) shows how bodies respond, adapt and give form to particular landscapes (Laurier and Brown 2008; Laurier and Philo 2003).

Other attempts to elucidate some of the diverse non-representational qualities of body-landscape relations are found in the work of Hayden Lorimer. For him, the challenge of non-representational work is how to adequately narrate the unfolding and dynamic qualities of body-landscape encounters. In his study of a Cairngorm Reindeer herd, Lorimer (2006) narrates the landscape through ethnographic reflections, contending that the landscape can be ‘made known’ through human and animal movements across it. He understands these movements as a form of empirical ‘knowledge-in-practice’ that he tries to convey through a heavily detailed empirical account. For example, one particular
passage that stands out includes an account of how when herding Reindeer, ‘You hear of the tendon that clicks audibly over bone, a reassuring sonar when vision is blinded in the worst of weather’ (499). This attempt to convey a living landscape through ethnography and accompanying expressive modes of writing offers him ‘...a more inclusive sort of intellectual investment: one that accommodates understandings of living in the thick of landscape that are not only ours’ (Lorimer 2006, 516).

Attempts to creatively narrate and represent body-landscape relations in the light of NRT can also be found in Yusoff’s (2007) study of Antarctic exploration. In this study she writes about the ability of landscape to enscribe the Antarctic explorers body – from tired muscles to snow blindness and she creatively restages an Antarctic encounter through a photo essay involving action man figures. Her work draws inspiration from (and is indicative of) a range of researchers in geography who have begun to adopt experimental writing and photo essay methods to ‘represent’ some of the irreducible and creative qualities of embodied landscape encounters (Pinder 2001; Dewsbury 2003; Lorimer and Lund 2003; McCormack 2002; Wylie 2006a).

Another recent example of this creative approach to representing landscape encounter is Wylie’s (2006b) photo essay ‘Smoothlands: fragments/landscapes/fragments’. This work builds on established traditions of writing in the arts and humanities which grapple with the limits of language and on earlier writing in geography which attempts to get at the complex, fragmented nature of human experience (Pred 1984, 1995). Such experimental writing and accompanying photography provides a valuable antidote to work which assumes that landscape is a self-evident given. However, I would argue that such creative approaches should not be considered to be the only solution to narrating body-landscape relations in the wake of NRT, for, as Phelan (1993) warns, although it is important to acknowledge the limits to our accounts it is also important to try to avoid self-absorption or self-annihilation.

In my own work, which explores how walkers with visual impairments experience the landscapes of the Lake and Peak Districts in Britain, I acted as a sighted guide to attend to the collective ‘inter-corporeal’ nature of moving through a landscape as part of a group (Macpherson 2009b). Entwining insights from phenomenology, neurobiology, linguistics and opthamology I attempt to navigate the bodily, discursive and material landscape and show how this landscape becomes present ‘intercorporeally’; as a tangible, tactile relationship between sighted guide and walker; as a historical relationship with one’s own embodied past and as a socio-cultural relationship with what is popularly understood to constitute ‘the’ landscape.

Such an approach to understanding how landscape operates and becomes present in walker’s experiences could not have been formed in isolation from the empirical circumstances to which it refers. Like Lorimer (2006), I attempt to convey a sense of landscape as both contingent upon the bodies that move across it and which gives shape to those embodied subjects. However, I also advocate a careful use of insights from the human sciences to elucidate such accounts. This work that narrates the relations between landscape and visual impairment is an important intervention into recent debates on landscape in geography, because it draws attention to the potential place of disability in these accounts and to the possible usefulness and limits of neurobiological research. In a recent paper on laughter (Macpherson 2008b), I continue to develop this approach to understanding body-landscape relations, showing how the laughter of walkers with visual impairments is connected to their seemingly paradoxical presence in picturesque landscape; how their laughter contributes to the transient materiality of those landscapes and
how laughter is a response to their relationships with sighted guides and to the embodied and endorphin filled practice of walking itself.

Such non-representational understandings of body-landscape relations exist in continuity with some social model approaches to disability, for both approaches give recognition to how landscape can be constitutive of our experience of embodiment. However, it is also important to acknowledge that a non-representational approach to disability can also jar some of the more pragmatic political aims of researchers of disability. For example, non-representational work encourages a sceptical humanism and a thorough analysis of the limits and possible authenticity of self-reported accounts (Braidotti 2006; Harrison 2006). This approach exists in tension with researchers of disability and other followers of participatory forms of research who often prioritize the personal narratives in the fight for recognition, rights and equality.

This tension between a pragmatic participatory politics of the day and faithfulness to the complexity of body-landscape relations identified through NRT cannot be necessarily resolved. I attempt to work across this tension sometimes deploying a form of ‘strategic essentialism’ to communicate some of the expressed experiences and needs of this ‘disabled group’ and sometimes remaining more faithful to the complex irreducible nature of visually impaired experience (Macpherson 2009c,d). However, this issue continues to present difficulties for many researchers of ‘under-represented’ groups who are trying to chart a way through the potential applicability of non-representational approaches. It would therefore seem to be irrefutable that landscape continues to be a ‘tension’ (Rose and Wylie 2006) and certainly researching body-landscape relations in the wake of NRT brings to the surface new tensions within the discipline geography. What will be interesting to see is how these tensions of researching body-landscape relations play out in our future accounts.

Short Biography

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References


