Can assemblage think difference? A feminist critique of assemblage geographies

Eden Kinkaid

University of Arizona, USA

Abstract

Assemblage thinking has been increasingly engaged by geographers to theoretically and empirically challenge philosophical categories and spatial imaginaries that have long been dominant in the field. Assemblage thinking presents exciting theoretical and methodological opportunities for geographers, yet its shortcomings are becoming increasingly clear. This article examines one such shortcoming: assemblage geographies' lack of engagement with feminist thought. I approach assemblage's uses in geography – assemblage as descriptor, concept, and ethos – as an entry point for a feminist critique, examining the potential of assemblage thinking to critically address issues of social difference, power, and the maintenance of inequality.

I Introduction

Over the last several years, 'assemblages' have increasingly made their way into geography. This uptake of assemblage thinking in geography reflects a larger 'ontological turn' cutting across numerous disciplines. This shift is characterized by a renewed interest in various forms of materialism and a reconsideration of the central terms of Western metaphysics. Numerous strands of thought have emerged out of this shift: new materialisms, speculative realism, and object-oriented ontology to name a few (Povinelli, 2016: 69). While this proliferation of concepts and lexicons is exciting and potentially transformative to several disciplines, there is also rightful concern that the fragmented development of these paradigms might frustrate the critical possibilities of the 'ontological turn' as a whole.

In particular, feminist scholars have noted that some of these strands 'seem to actively *connect* with the varied feminist archive of speculative thought while others seem to actively *disconnect* from the very same archive' (Åsberg et al., 2015, original emphasis: 146). 'With each new branding,' Povinelli remarks, 'new genealogies are advanced, old feuds continued, continuities posed then abandoned' (2016: 69). As Åsberg et al. are keen to point out, these 'new' genealogies often reproduce many of the philosophical and ethical problems feminist theorists have worked on for decades, reminding us to be critical of any intellectual 'turn' and how it may effect genealogical

Corresponding author:

Eden Kinkaid, School of Geography and Development, University of Arizona, 1064 E. Lowell St., Tucson, AZ 85719, USA.

Email: ekinkaid@email.arizona.edu

erasures, abandon critical categories, and rearticulate dominant subject positions.

This article develops out of a similar concern regarding assemblage geographies: that they remain remarkably aloof from feminist thought. I argue that assemblage geographies are seriously limited in their descriptive, conceptual, and ethico-political potential by ignoring feminist concerns, including social difference, power, positionality, and related epistemological problems. This article will develop and engage these concerns along with the exciting possibilities assemblage thinking offers to geographic thought.

II A feminist critique of assemblage geographies

Feminist theory is a diverse and pluralistic body of thought that has given rise to myriad terminologies, conceptual frames, ethics, and political projects. I am engaging 'feminist critique' as the most parsimonious entry point to my critique of assemblage thinking because it offers a language to name some of its conceptual shortcomings. Here, 'feminist' refers in a broad sense to methodologies, analytics, and ethics that attend centrally to the production, 'mattering', and mobilization of difference. This particular feminist problem frame has emerged from the work of poststructuralist/materialist feminists who have been attentive to the manner in which the turn to poststructuralism produced problematic silences around embodiment, gender, sexuality, and the 'mattering' of difference in dominant theoretical frames (e.g. Braidotti, 1996; Butler, 1993; Grosz, 1994). Many of these same concerns reemerge from this most recent turn 'beyond' poststructuralism – a philosophical shift described as 'the ontological turn' or a 'return' to materialism – renewing the relevance of these feminist critiques.

To demonstrate how feminist concerns (should) enter into assemblage geographies, I approach three modes of engagement with assemblage in geography – assemblage as descriptor, concept, and ethos – as the starting points for a feminist critique (Anderson et al., 2012). I first demonstrate how each mode of assemblage thinking becomes limited by ignoring feminist concerns. I then provide examples of how scholars engaging assemblage in geography and other fields have deployed assemblage thinking as a feminist methodology, a feminist relational analytic, and a feminist ethico-political practice. These interventions highlight the relevance of social difference in assemblage thinking, render visible the differential operations of power in assemblages, and interrogate how forms of inequality endure and resist transformation.

While this article expresses concerns about the theoretical foundations and priorities of assemblage geographies, I ultimately argue that a critical engagement with these matters is not outside of the scope of assemblage thinking. In fact, assemblage thinking holds much promise for thinking about the production of difference, relations of power, issues of subjectivity and other matters central to feminist thought – a claim that I evidence through engagements with feminist deployments of assemblage thinking. However, my concern is that without explicitly centering these issues in the formulation of assemblage geographies, these concerns more often than not recede from view. There is nothing inevitable or necessary about the occlusions I interrogate here; rather, they are produced and consolidated through the specific engagements and debates that are giving shape to this emerging field of geographic thought. My purpose here then is to identify where these omissions occur and how an engagement with feminist thought can further develop and strengthen the critical potential of assemblage thinking in geography.

III Assemblage as description: Developing a feminist methodology

In its most straightforward sense, the term 'assemblage' describes processes through

which different entities come together, form relations, and operate as provisional 'wholes'. Anderson and McFarlane describe: 'assemblage is used as a *descriptor* for some form of provisional unity across differences' (2011: 125, original emphasis). 'Assemblage' can refer to processes – for instance, urban regeneration (McGuirk et al., 2016), neighborhood change (Grossmann and Haase, 2016), or participatory development (Grove and Pugh, 2015). Here, it is key 'to understand assembling as a process of "co-functioning" whereby heterogeneous elements come together in a non-homogenous grouping' (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011: 125). Assemblage is also used in a nominal manner to describe socio-spatial formations (e.g. cities; McCann, 2011; McFarlane, 2011; Parker, 2009). However, even in this nominal form, descriptions of assemblages emphasize processes of formation and the dynamism and contingency of relations.

Assemblage has been used to describe numerous entities and processes within geography, including social movements (Baird, 2015; Davies, 2012; Davis, 2017), international relations (Acuto and Curtis, 2014), race (Saldanha, 2006; Swanton, 2010), policy (Pow, 2014; Prince, 2010), and numerous other topics. These applications may demonstrate the idea's currency and utility, or it may demonstrate a lack of analytic clarity and purpose. Reflecting on this plethora of uses, Anderson and McFarlane worry that the 'risk is that literally anything comes to be described as "an" assemblage' (2011: 125). Others note 'a failure to define the concept of assemblage with appropriate precision and, by consequence, its overextension to encompass a broad range of only partially connected meanings' (Wachsmuth et al., 2011: 742). Indeed, we might ask what 'assemblage', as a descriptor of provisional formations of entities and relations, *could not* describe.

While this critique warrants concern and methodological reflection, we also might pause and reflect on the question of what assemblage chooses not to describe, or what exceeds the strict mandate of its 'thick description' (McFarlane, 2011). Here, I am concerned that social categories like race, gender, and sexuality are missing or dismissed from the foundational premises and applications of assemblage geographies, and are oftentimes casually 'deconstructed' as 'abstract categories'. Indeed, there is a concern that assemblage thinking, given its 'emphasis on material politics, has abandoned "traditional" social categories such as class, gender and ethnicity' (Davies, 2011: 275). This rejection is not wholesale; rather, it is argued that categories of race, gender, sexuality, etc., should not be taken as given, but should be approached as matters in need of explanation and outcomes of particular forms of social practice. While I agree with this stance, I still am concerned that explaining these forms of social difference is missing from the stated agenda of assemblage geographies (see Anderson and McFarlane, 2011).

There are exceptions here: Saldanha (2006) and Swanton (2012) have used assemblage thinking to consider 'race' as a mobile constellation of meanings and practices. Rather than approach race epistemologically, they approach race 'ontologically, as a real process demanding particular concepts and commitments. Not so much representations, but bodies and physical events will be foregrounded' (Saldanha, 2006: 9). Here, race is a relational *event* that produces particular socio-spatial orderings. Both Saldanha and Swanton use assemblage in this way to describe processes of racialization that influence how bodies encounter each other in space and how they mobilize sets of meanings that feedback into socio-spatial orders and strategies of governance. In other words, their accounts are not 'applications' of assemblage thinking to a preconceived object called 'race'; their deployments of racializing and racist assemblages force us to reconsider our entire approach to social categories and the dynamics we are attempting to describe through the language of assemblage.

These accounts, alongside others (Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2017; Puar, 2007, 2017), demonstrate how assemblage thinking can be put to innovative and critical use to interrogate social categories like race, gender, and sexuality. Approaching these categories (which turn out to be processes, events, encounters, etc.) through assemblage thinking demonstrates how a remarkable diversity of sites, bodies, meanings, and processes are assembled through (and, in turn, productive of) social categories of difference. If we accept these arguments, that 'race' and other social categories assemble bodies, space, and places with great force and effect and thus 'matter' space, why are we so ready to jettison these categories? If we do not begin from them, or at least with them in view, how will we be able to see them operating in the world?

To approach this question, we must ask what these 'social categories' describe. The assumption guiding the decision to bracket these categories in social scientific accounts seems to be based on the poststructuralist critique that social categories are *identities,* 'fictions' that 'fix' complex and dynamic processes into stable, self-referential forms (e.g. Butler, 1990). However, the idea that social categories refer only to identities is reductive and oversimplifies poststructuralist critiques of identity (including Butler's). Indeed, we might consider how categories of 'race', 'gender', and 'sexuality' become perceived as identities *through a particular operation of power* when they in fact describe a set of social relations and transpersonal forces. Take, for instance, the category of 'sexuality'. Fox and Alldred maintain:

> Sexuality . . . has two manifestations. First, it refers to the deterritorializing, nomadic, and rhizomic flow of affect between and around bodies and other relations, a *socially productive* flow that allows Deleuze and Guattari (1984: 293) to claim that 'sexuality is everywhere' . . . However, in a second manifestation, the rhizomic flow of affect is continuously subject to restrictions and blockages (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984) often

produced by molar, aggregating affects that codify, categorize, and organize. (2013: 776)

Sexuality thus pervades every socio-spatial order, every relation. However, through the imposition of molar categories (e.g. identities), sexuality becomes *territorialized* to specific bodies, relations, desires, and identities. To understand what sexuality, or other identity categories, like gender or race, 'have to do' with assemblages, we need to look beyond these territorialized, individualized forms and consider what modes of (non)relation, (in)capacitation, and (im)mobility 'sexuality' as a social relation might name (see Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2017). We must resist the territorialization of these forces onto bodies marked by difference, yet we also cannot afford to fully dispense with the identities and categories that result from these territorializations.

Thus, to a certain degree, proponents of assemblage thinking are right to say that these molar social categories are restrictive and should be abandoned for intellectual and political purposes (Anderson et al., 2012: 186). However, by ignoring the manner in which these categories territorialize trans-personal forces onto particular bodies, this dismissal runs the risk of further invisibilizing the production of social difference. These are forces and power relations that preexist and exceed the individual, while producing and constraining individual subjectivities. Accordingly, these bodies and identities should be approached as localizations and condensations of trans-personal forces, and as such, critical positions from which to describe and critique the assemblages that produce, mobilize, and maintain these bodies' differential symbolic-material status. In other words, if we want to dispense with race, gender, and sexuality as categories, *we need to replace them with something*: we must produce critical accounts of racialization, gendering, and sexualization of bodies and spaces and bring them to bear on all assemblage geographies, not just

ones specifically concerned with the production of these categories.

Feminist work on the mattering of difference proves a crucial resource here. Outside of assemblage geographies, scholars have applied assemblage thinking as part of a feminist methodological approach that is committed to describing and understanding how these forms of difference become mobilized in social and political projects. These accounts are not just about 'race' or 'sexuality' per se, but use these categories as optics to encounter larger social and political formations. For example, Puar (2007) and Chen (2012) start with the term 'queer' and trace how it animates larger social and political processes, tracing its 'lines of flight' and various transubstantiations. Their approaches demonstrate what I am calling a feminist methodological principle of assemblage, which traces how assemblages of materials, meanings, and practices are both *racialized* (i.e. reflective of and reliant upon social difference for their operation) and *racializing* (i.e. demonstrating differential impacts on bodies and populations and, in doing so, reproducing the symbolic-material differentials that define them) (Puar, 2017: 69). In so far as they demonstrate how social categories come to 'matter' in a diversity of processes, these projects demonstrate the importance of attending to social categories in assemblage thinking, even when one's project is not necessarily 'about' race, gender, or sexuality per se.

For example, Puar employs assemblages as a feminist/queer methodological approach that traces how the mobilization of particular identity categories operates as a mode of racialization with effects that infuse contemporary social and political orders. Puar 'deploy[s] "racialization" as a figure for specific social formations and processes that are not necessarily or only tied to what has been historically theorized as race', emphasizing how populations become marked and (re)produced through processes of ascribing difference to them (Puar, 2007: xii).

Puar's work is instructive because it demonstrates how the 'queering' logics of biopolitical warfare organize and are indeed constitutive of a stunning array of everyday social, (geo)political, and economic processes that, on the surface, are not 'related to' sexuality. In doing so, Puar illustrates how gender, race, and sexuality, as modes of racialization, are constitutive logics of social and spatial orderings including citizenship, 'militarism, securitization, war, terrorism, surveillance technologies, torture, nationalism, globalization, fundamentalism, secularism, incarceration, detention, deportation, and neoliberalism' (2007: xiv). Following Puar, it would be difficult to locate an assemblage for study that *did not* link up to these logics in some way.

Chen's work is similarly engaged with thinking about assemblages in relation to categories of queerness and race. In *Animacies*, Chen traces how longstanding ontological hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, and species structure political discourse and geopolitical processes in unanticipated ways. For example, Chen traces the emergence of a US consumer panic related to lead-based paints on children's toys imported from China. To connect racializing logics to these material and discursive flows, differential exposure to toxins, and other events and processes, Chen engages assemblage thinking:

> Deleuze and Guattari's thinking is useful in the sense that I attempt not only to accentuate proximal relations among categorically differentiated entities . . . but equally to emphasize the insistent segregations of 'material' into intensified condensations (affective intensities) of race, geography, and capital. In this light, the toxicities tied to heavy metals function as a kind of 'assemblage' of biology, affect, nationality, race, and chemistry. And yet their analysis leaves little room for distinctions between 'actual' and 'abstract' . . . (2012: 206)

For Chen, then, the 'abstractness' or 'nonmateriality' of social categories does not bar them from description through the language of

assemblage. Rather, the manner in which race, gender, and sexuality *organize* material flows, political discourse, health outcomes, etc., is what makes assemblage a useful analytic; it can describe and bring together the 'abstract' and the 'actual', the operations of symbolic *and* material economies to address how race, gender, and sexuality come to 'matter'.

Puar and Chen's engagements with assemblage thinking demonstrate that social categories indeed produce symbolic and material differentials that must be accounted for. Further, in so far as assemblage is concerned with how entities come into relation and what temporalities and spatialities result, social categories could provide compelling explanations of these dynamics. For instance, Saldanha and Swanton discuss how bodies are racialized, producing different modes of proximity and relation between bodies and other bodies, meanings, materials, affects, etc. As a counterpoint to oft-described fluidity of assemblages, they both deploy ideas of viscosity and stickiness to describe how bodies become aggregated or segregated:

> Far from being an arbitrary classification system imposed upon bodies, race is a nonnecessary and irreducible effect of the ways those bodies themselves interact with each other and their physical environment. The spatiality of race is . . . one of viscosity, bodies gradually becoming sticky and clustering into aggregates. (Saldanha, 2006: 10)

If 'race' informs how socio-spatial relations form and endure, the category of race and processes of racialization are indispensable in our descriptions of assemblages. Race and other categories inform the mobility, capacities, and agency of bodies and aggregates of bodies; if we deracinate these categories, we lose a critical lens for understanding why some bodies and systems are mobile and capable of transformation, while others are not (Puar, 2017: 26).

In so far as social categories inform the shape assemblages take – their relations, affinities, affective charges, capacities, etc. – and are mobilized and reproduced in diverse realms of social, economic, and political life, assemblage geographies must account for the operation of these social categories in *all* descriptions of social worlds, not only those expressly concerned with the formation of these categories. An attunement to categories of social difference, and how they materialize in socio-spatial formations and dynamics, is critical for developing not only the descriptive, but also the analytical and ethical implications of assemblage geographies.

IV Assemblage as concept: Engaging a feminist relational analytic

Within geography, assemblage has been applied as a concept for describing various socio-spatial orders and processes. These uses draw mainly on the work of Deleuze and Guattari and stress three main characteristics of assemblages: they are composed of heterogeneous elements; they are driven by processes of emergence; and they are historically contingent, subject to stratification, yet open to transformation (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011). I will focus here on two related theoretical concerns that emerge from these foundations of assemblage geographies: theorizations of power and the role of the symbolic. After reviewing how power has been theoretically treated in assemblage geographies, I will turn to points of critique and productive engagement with feminist relational approaches that attend centrally to the relational production of (material and symbolic) difference as an operation of power.

In examining theorizations of power in assemblage thinking, it is first necessary to consider its ontological premises, from which notions of power arise. These premises can be clustered under the heading 'flat ontology', a position that attempts to overcome ontological distinctions in Western philosophical thought,

namely those between subject and object (DeLanda, 2016: 19–20). Flat ontology is part of a 'material return' in philosophical and critical social thought, wherein the presumed ontological difference and non-agency of objects is seriously reconsidered (Latour, 2005).

Flat ontology poses interesting challenges for geographers in that it entails a revision of scalar and hierarchical ontologies more broadly. As DeLanda describes, 'because the ontological status of all assemblages is the same, entities operating at different scales can directly interact with one another . . . a possibility that does not exist in a hierarchical ontology' (2016: 19–20). In a discussion of power and assemblages, Müller reiterates: '[f]or Deleuze and Guattari, there are thus no pre-determined hierarchies . . . All entities – humans, animals, things and matters – have the same ontological status to start with' (Müller, 2015: 28). Müller slightly revises this position, noting

> [h]owever, as Elizabeth Grosz (1994: 167) remarks, 'it is not that the world is without strata, totally flattened; rather, the hierarchies are not the result of substances and their nature and value but of modes of organization of disparate substances'. (Müller, 2015: 28)

Feminist theorist Grosz is arguing, in other words, that there is not an essential, ontological difference that structures bodies or other entities in hierarchies; their location in any hierarchy is rather a product of social practice. This process of stratification, in other words, describes the *production of social difference.*

What is problematic about deployments of flat ontology within assemblage thinking is that they often sidestep Grosz's intervention and stick with the original premise: there is no *innate* 'difference', hierarchy, or social order, full stop. In other words, they do not dismiss a priori symbolic categories in order to more closely consider the social practices that produce them; they just choose not to dwell on issues of social and symbolic difference

altogether. Müller acknowledges that this lack of discussion of symbolic hierarchies is problematic, reflecting that in 'the turn to materialities, the preoccupation of the cultural turn with symbolic orders may have somewhat faded from view' (Müller, 2015: 36). Once again, this is an intellectual and methodological oversight, not a problem inherent to assemblage thinking; the co-constitution and indivisibility of the material and symbolic could actually be seen as an analytical strength and innovation of this approach. However, a serious accounting of the hierarchical production of symbolic and material difference often somehow fades from view. It is worth wondering if the general acknowledgement and celebration of 'difference' (as 'heterogeneity') as a foundational ontological principle in assemblage thinking serves to flatten out these historically specific forms of social difference and obscure their coherence within specific symbolic and material regimes of value (e.g. white supremacy, patriarchy).

Given these 'flat' philosophical premises, notions of power deployed in accounts of assemblage thinking similarly lack nuance. Anderson and McFarlane describe '[p]art of the appeal of assemblage . . . lies in its reading of power as multiple co-existences – assemblage connotes not a central governing power, nor a power distributed equally, but power as plurality in transformation' (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011: 125). In a similar vein, Anderson et al. describe that assemblage thinking 'locate[s] power as a contingent and multiple force in relation to which assemblages are made and remade' (2012: 180). This revision of notions of power is seen as the 'political edge' of assemblage thinking, in that it 'questions the naturalisation of hegemonic assemblages and renders them open to political challenge by exposing their contingency' (Müller, 2015: 31). Allen similarly emphasizes the non-coherence and 'coexistence and entanglements' of different manifestations of power (2011: 155).

These formulations of power draw on similar foundations (namely Foucault), as do feminist projects. Yet, unlike assemblage geographies, feminist thought is necessarily wedded to categories of difference and a concern with how the production of difference and identity is always already an operation of power. Further, feminist and anti-racist projects have demonstrated how 'ontology' as a Western metaphysical project cannot be flat; it is organized around an animacy hierarchy that ascribes value, subjectivity, and agency to bodies through the mutable but recalcitrant categories of sex, race, gender, and sexuality (Chen, 2016; Schuller, 2017; Weheliye, 2014). Povinelli argues that from the viewpoint of minority and colonized subjects:

> the world of objects and subjects is not flat. It must be viewed from the unequal forces redrawing and demanding certain formations as the condition for an object's endurance, extension, and domination of interest. (2016: 91)

Further, Saldanha remarks:

> [f]latness is an epistemological illusion . . . flatness leads to a relativism at odds not only with the professed realism but also our ethico-political commitments to intervention. (2012: 195)

We can imagine then how a commitment to 'flatness' prevents us from asking more specific questions about the uneven operations of power.

It is clear then that the issue of power in assemblage geographies cannot be addressed without a critical consideration of its ontology. How assemblage thinking can intervene in the longstanding problems of Western metaphysics through an 'ontological turn' without bumping into categories of identity/difference *as relations of power* is a cause for concern, given that these categories and their differential valuation have long pervaded Western thought (Chen, 2012; Weheliye, 2014). Without attending to how bodies have been invested with ontological difference, and how these symbolic economies operate *through* categories of social difference,

assemblage thinking fails to render visible the operations of power and is poorly equipped to address the question of how symbolic-material differentials are maintained and endure. Once again, I stress that this is not an issue of assemblage thinking writ large, as some have applied assemblage thinking explicitly to take up these issues. Rather, it is the product of a particular application of assemblage thinking, one that positions itself as 'strongly ontological' (see Brenner et al., 2011, for further discussion) and chooses not to prioritize these political questions.

These concerns necessitate a reconsideration of issues of power in assemblage geographies. To account for the multiple and differential (rather than 'plural') operations of power, assemblage geographies must account for the operation of economies of value that are both material *and* symbolic. Here I engage feminist theory to serve as a supplement to assemblage thinking for thinking through the role of the symbolic in the production of uneven socio-spatial orders. A feminist relational analytical approach proves necessary here, as it is capable of examining the *relational production* of identity/difference and the differential distribution of symbolic and material value in dominant socio-spatial orders.

Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus* provides an excellent study in how assemblage thinking in conjunction with feminist and anti-racist analytics can be used to think about the relational production of social difference in symbolic and material terms. Drawing on the work of black feminist theorist Sylvia Wynter (2003, 2006), Weheliye's critique centers on the productive paradoxes of liberal humanism. Following Wynter, he argues that the category of 'human' at the center of liberal humanism has always been overdetermined as that of (European) 'Man'. This substitution has allowed 'liberal' humanist discourse to proliferate alongside biopolitical projects, including the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism. Indeed, the 'Man'

of liberal humanism haunts biopolitical projects in so far as it marks and (re)produces a differentiation between 'genres' of the human, forms of racialized difference that mark the 'cut' between a biopolitics of life and a biopolitics of death (Weheliye, 2014: 87). In other words, 'difference' – encoded through symbolic (and material) regimes – is closely sutured to that of the political and subtends countless forms of institutionalized and racialized violence.

Weheliye's recourse to the term 'racializing assemblages' attempts to render visible this moment of racialization as constitutive of larger social, political, economic processes, not simply as a mean of applying 'assemblages' to 'race' as a social, biological, or cultural category:

> The idea of racializing assemblages . . . construes race not as a biological or cultural classification but as a set of sociopolitical process that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans. (2014: 4)

The operations of racializing assemblages illuminate the 'human' as a differentiated, biopolitical category through which 'humanity' operates *as a relational whole* (2014: 21). It thus becomes clear why we cannot dismiss race as a category in our considerations of ontology: an approach to racializing assemblages entails that we center how processes of racialization network 'bodies, forces, velocities, intensities, institutions, interests, ideologies, and desires' (2014: 12). The racializing operations of assemblages – how they sort and differentiate human bodies (Swanton, 2010) and ascribe symbolic/material value accordingly – is thus a critical element in understanding the formation of any socio-spatial order and the manner in which its elements gather, relate, cohere, disperse, and endure.

For Weheliye, racializing assemblages is a powerful concept for describing the circuits of material and symbolic meaning that attend the differentiation and hierarchization of human bodies, and thus underwrite forms of political

and lived violence. Yet the relational analysis that 'racializing assembalges' allows also provides insights into how racialized categories might be re-signified and mobilized against this marginalization. Here, Weheliye relies on black feminist theorist Hortense Spillers' conception of the flesh, an ambivalent site produced through the dehumanizing, ungendering violence of a seemingly total subjection but one that also stands as a site of radical potential (Spillers, 1987). Weheliye writes:

> The flesh . . . excavates the social (after)life of these categories: it represents racializing assemblages of subjection that can never annihilate the lines of flight, freedom dreams, practices of liberation, and possibilities of other worlds. (2014: 2)

Racializing assemblages thus work to maintain and rearticulate (i.e. territorialize) racialized hierarchies and onto-epistemological formations, yet can also be leveraged to disrupt, reimagine, and reconfigure (i.e. deterritorialize) forms of categorical subjectification and subjugation (2014: 12).

The scope of Weheliye's account demonstrates how pervasive racializing logics are in contemporary social and political life. 'Race' and 'identity' are not incidental to these formations; they are the naturalized traces and localizations of the processes of racialization that organize dominant regimes of 'the human'. The manner in which they become understood as embodied difference (i.e. lack), rather than the product of particular social and symbolic practices, strongly suggests that these categories cannot be disentangled from the symbolic regimes that naturalize them. Avoiding the question of how processes of racialization produce socio-spatial, political, and economic orders, and how these processes are underwritten by dominant symbolic regimes, works to obscure the relational production of difference and inequality. It also leaves us poorly equipped to think about the multiple operations of power

and how these relations endure in both dominant symbolic and material regimes, and the manner in which they remain flexible to the needs of biopolitical projects and other forms of racialized violence.

As I hope to have demonstrated through this brief engagement with Weheliye's work, critical deployments of assemblages must attend to the relational production of difference and cannot treat social/symbolic categories as merely incidental, or not even relevant, to the formation and maintenance of dominant sociospatial orders. Indeed, the symbolic production of difference provides a critical lens for understanding the simultaneous flexibility and endurance, fixity and fluidity of racializing assemblages, their uneven and differential operations across categories of social difference, and their potentials for retrenchment and resignification. Engagements with feminist thought, and works like Weheliye's that draw from it, are crucial here, insofar as feminist philosophy and activism has long been attentive to the production of difference through symbolic regimes, the relationality of symbolic and material orders, and the productive exclusions of dominant philosophical and political projects.

V Assemblage as ethos: Toward a feminist ethics

Third, and lastly, assemblage has been deployed within geography as an ethos or mode of engagement with the world. As Anderson and McFarlane describe:

> cutting across its use as a descriptor and concept, assemblage also suggests a certain ethos of engagement with the world, one that experiments with methodological and presentational practices in order to attend to a lively world of differences. (2011: 126)

This ethos of assemblage thinking is expressed as an openness or attentiveness to difference,

possibility, and change (Adey, 2012). McFarlane and Anderson argue that

> [a]s an orientation, assemblage functions . . . as an ethos of engagement attuned to the possibilities of socio-spatial formations to be otherwise within various constraints and historical trajectories. (2011: 162)

This openness to transformation almost seems to *necessitate* the disavowal of abstract categories:

> [a]t its most simple a politics of assemblage maps how powerful assemblages form and endure, thus loosening the deadening grip abstract categories hold over our sense of political possibility. (Anderson et al., 2012: 186)

As these statements might suggest, assemblage as an ethos has placed much emphasis on transformation, flexibility, and openness, arguably at the expense of theorizing how socio-spatial orders endure and reproduce relations of symbolic-material inequality. Despite some qualifications (Müller, 2015: 36), themes of flux, transformation, and possibility remain central to the ethos of 'thinking assemblage' (Wachsmuth et al., 2011; Tonkiss, 2011: 584). As Brenner et al. observe, this possibility is 'ontologically presupposed rather than being understood as historically specific or immanent to the sociomaterial relations under investigation' (2011: 235), making it difficult to identify possible constraints or trajectories for concrete change. Further, this 'overgeneralized insistence on the openness, contingency, malleability and indeterminacy of sociospatial forms prior to or independent of concrete, contextually embedded and informed investigation' (Wachsmuth et al., 2011: 742) can recapitulate the logics of racial thinking (Schuller, 2017) and neoliberalism (Puar, 2017) in failing to account for which bodies are invested with fluidity and mobility, what forms of privilege enable this 'openness to transformation', and what causes

other relations to persist and resist transformation.

Along similar lines, Brenner et al. worry about how questions of *political* agency are eclipsed by conceptions of ontological agency (2011: 236), while Puar questions the value 'of investing in notions of vibrant matter without concomitant attention to the material conditions of the production of that matter, not to mention deracinated and desexualized notions of vibrancy and agency' (2017: 26). Saldanha echoes these concerns:

> When Anderson et al. observe race like any assemblage is fundamentally provisional by virtue of its heterogeneous composition, this is a first step, but staying with provisionality and fluidity is politically no different than what commercial multiculturalism promotes. The next step is to show how this is exactly what makes racial differences persist. (Saldanha, 2012: 196)

Without this kind of reflection, celebrations of ontological fluidity can rearticulate dominant orders; as Saldanha remarks: 'ultimately cosmopolitanism without critique and intervention remains complacent with its own comfortably mobile position' (2006: 22).

Assemblage thinking can begin to correct this imbalance by asking more questions about how social difference is (re)produced and how relations of inequality endure and resist transformation. Accounts of change must also consider how 'transformations' in systems often reproduce, recode, and further entrench dominant symbolic relations. We might then be led to a different set of questions.

There are resources within geography to pose these sorts of questions of assemblage geographies. McGuirk et al. advocate for an

> explicitly strategic and politicised assemblage thinking that might inform strategic forms of assembling aimed to counter attempts to govern for particular interests and arrangements of power that prevent movement towards more 'emancipatory assemblages'. (2016: 138)

Saldanha (2006) and Swanton (2010) provide some conceptualizations for working against overly fluid accounts of socio-spatial orders, describing how bodies are affected by different kinds of 'stickiness' and 'viscosity' in racialized ways:

> Neither perfectly fluid nor solid, the viscous invokes surface tension and resistance to perturbation and mixing . . . There are local and temporary thickenings of interacting bodies, which then collectively become sticky, capable of capturing more bodies like them. (Saldanha, 2006: 18)

Saldanha (2012) uses this concept to argue that assemblages racialize and sort bodies, whereas Swanton (2010) describes how perceptions of criminality 'stick to' Asian bodies in British post-industrial mill towns. Both provide important accounts of how bodies are differentially (de)mobilized and (in)capacitated by regimes of symbolic-material value.

These interventions open up larger questions for assemblage thinking that would be best addressed through more substantive engagements with ethical and political questions: '[r]ather than ending with questions ethical and political, perhaps we should start with them' (Saldanha, 2012: 197). To examine the potential for assemblages to obscure or otherwise fail to dismantle racializing logics and projects, assemblage thinking must develop its vaguely defined 'ethos' toward a feminist ethics. This entails concrete commitments to engaging questions of positionality, reflexivity, and other epistemological problems that arise in assemblage thinking.

Positionality refers to a basic ethical requirement that we attend to how the subject positions we inhabit inform the knowledge we produce (England, 1994; Haraway, 1988; Nagar and Geiger, 2007; Rose, 1997). Positionality has emerged as an ethical principle from various strands of feminist epistemology, including standpoint theory (Collins, 1986; Harding, 2004). These concepts describe how a subject

encounters and experiences the effects of a given set of relations depending on their 'angle of vision' (Murray Li, 2007: 265) and their position within material, social, and representational space, necessitating various 'viewpoints' to understand a given assemblage (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1992). Here, positionality does not refer to a view from a static or fixed 'identity position', or one that can be known in advance. Instead, it suggests the need for an accounting of how different bodies inhabit and navigate social systems, and how this informs our perceptions and conceptions of dominant socio-temporal and symbolic orders. This kind of accounting is largely missing from assemblage geographies; in so far as 'assemblage analysts deny that their work entails a process of conceptual abstraction, most are disinclined to engage in a reflexive analysis of its sociohistorical conditions of possibility' (Wachsmuth et al., 2011: 748), including questions of their own positionality and subjectivity. To the extent that work occurring in the ontological turn remains epistemologically locationless and unmarked (Puar, 2017: 25), positionality presents a key feminist intervention into this work.

When put into conversation with assemblage thinking, positionality becomes challenged and problematized in new ways that could prove productive for this longstanding feminist ethical principle (see Puar's [2007: 213] discussion). If we accept that the differential effects of assemblages are racialized and racializing, we must consider that from privileged subject positions, particular elements and power relations of an assemblage are obscured from view. If we are to describe and analyze the workings of assemblages without rearticulating privileged subject positions, then we must account for how 'codes shift for different bodies' (Chen, 2012: 40) and how particular material, social, and symbolic arrangements support some bodies and obstruct others (Ahmed, 2006; Puar, 2017). An awareness of our positionality as intellectuals and

social actors is indispensable in developing such understandings.

Like positionality, reflexivity is a feminist ethical principle through which we can more fully account for the political implications of the knowledge we produce and the power relations within which we do so (England, 1994; Rose, 1997). Reflexivity entails a critical accounting of one's location and a commitment to interrogating one's epistemological limitations and potential complicity in relations of dominance. Drawing specifically on feminist transnational praxis, Rankin argues that this sense of 'critical reflexivity' is crucial if assemblage thinking is to link up to any self-consciously political practice (Rankin, 2011: 567). The development of such a critical capacity need not rely on the development of more philosophical lexicons and problematics to address it. It rather depends, as Saldanha describes, upon the development of a sense of responsibility, a mode of ethical relation to others (2006: 21).

Finally, these considerations of positionality and reflexivity in assemblage geographies point to a more general oversight in assemblage thinking: epistemology. While one might argue that assemblage thinking is concerned with 'ontology' and not 'epistemology', epistemological problems persist in its formulation. While the distinction between ontology and epistemology is useful for reminding us that there is a world outside of our descriptions of it, the distinction becomes counterproductive when it is taken to mean that in 'doing ontology' we can somehow produce accounts of that world that do not rely on our own limited interpretations and perspectives. This 'naïve objectivism entails the view that the facticity of social life can be described "on its own terms", without recourse to interpretation or theory' (Wachsmuth et al., 2011: 744), invisibilizing epistemological locations and choices while running the risk of rearticulating ontological premises that are less than emancipatory. 'Doing ontology' without

reflexive accounts of one's epistemological position obscures the production of a power-laden reality and, in this way, 'power dissimulates as ontology' (Butler, 2004: 215).

Indeed, the history of philosophy is rife with evidence of the danger of separating ontology and epistemology (and questions of power). Chen reminds us how the differential ascription of valuation to particular bodies *as an ontological principle* and *as the product of a particular epistemological position* has long structured philosophical discourse:

> Animate hierarchies have settled into their current life as a palimpsest of a long journey through Aristotelian categorizations, Christian great chains of being, Linnaean typologies, biopolitical governances, capitalisms, and historical imperialisms; these are the traces and marks of privileged views upon the world. (2012: 233)

We cannot, then, separate this production and maintenance of ontological difference in philosophy from the production of social difference through the taxonomics of race, gender, and sexuality; these metaphysical principles infuse and motivate scientific paradigms (Schuller, 2017), dominant political philosophies (Weheliye, 2008; Povinelli, 2016) and everyday social practice.

In addressing these concerns of epistemology, and attendant ethical problems, assemblage geographies have much potential for theoretical and methodological development. However, advocates of assemblage must connect these philosophical premises to clear normative and political commitments and agendas if this philosophical turn is to live up to its oft celebrated potentials (Wachsmuth et al., 2011: 743; Russell et al., 2011). In short, if we are not going to intellectually start from 'abstractions' like race, gender, and sexuality, we ought to at least begin from a politically engaged ethical position that is anti-racist, anti-sexist, etc. It may take such ethical commitments to ensure

that assemblage thinking remains critical and sensitized to matters of social difference.

In summary, assemblage as an ethos requires much further consideration and development, in terms of its ontological, epistemological, and political premises. It has a lot to learn from other liberatory political projects that are similarly motivated by imagining things 'otherwise', but do not dispense with the violence that frames the here and now. Queer utopian imaginaries are similarly captivated by the possibility of a world 'otherwise', but work through the contradictions of queerness in the present to imagine other possible worlds (Muñoz, 2009). Black queer counter-historical projects also come to mind as models for recovering the possible from history and activating the contingency and openness of the present toward another future (Richardson, 2013; Snorton, 2017).

VI Conclusion

Assemblage thinking, like any emergent paradigm, is marked by serious shortcomings and fascinating potentials for conducting critical geographic work. The danger is that, in disavowing social categories, assemblage thinking may further obscure the operations of power and inequality. On the other hand, assemblage thinking might provide a new lexicon for naming and describing the symbolic-material circuits of meaning and value that produce socio-spatial orders, how these structures operate relationally and differentially across populations, and how human inequality is sustained and rendered productive within these circuits.

Indeed, with some critical accounting – reflexive debates that are already well underway in geography – assemblage might provide a critical lexicon for better understanding and intervening in the uneven geographies of our world. Yet in order to activate these possibilities and avert these dangers assemblage geographies must conduct a serious accounting of its theoretical foundations and normative commitments.

As I hope to have demonstrated in this article, a deep engagement with feminist thought would be a productive starting point. Regardless of the specific form this engagement takes, we must begin by problematizing and politicizing the foundations of our theories of the world, theories that are necessarily produced within relations of symbolic and material privilege and inequality and too often unwittingly sustain those relations.

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ORCID iD

Eden Kinkaid ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0793-2049

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  Paradigm Press, 121–184.

Author biography

Eden Kinkaid is a Doctoral Student in Geography at
the University of Arizona. Eden's dissertation work
focuses on issues of organic governance and agrarian
change in North India. In addition to this project, Eden
is interested in various issues at the intersections of
geography, philosophy, and gender studies, including
assemblage thinking, phenomenology, queer theory,
and philosophies of space and the subject.