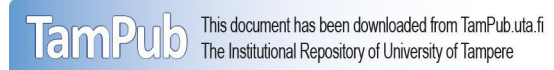Between ontology and representation: Locating Gilles Deleuze's 'difference-in-itself' in and for geographical thought

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Abstract

The concept of difference has long been integral to geographical thought. However, it is rare for geographers to consider precisely what difference is, or how it functions, and there are several contrasting traditions through which difference is understood. We argue that geographers could helpfully extend their theorizations of difference through Deleuze's philosophy of 'difference-in-itself'. We examine the value of a 'difference-in-itself' that views difference as generative, originary, and primary, in productive tension with conceptions of difference that tend to, purposefully or otherwise, subordinate difference to presupposed identity-based, representational categories, or dialectical forms of contradiction and opposition.

Keywords

I Introduction

Our assumptions about difference play a large role in how we analyze, apprehend, and critique the world we observe, as well as in our ability to imagine and enact alternatives to the often daunting assumption that 'what is' is also 'what should be'. Conceptualizations of difference have played important roles in different strands of geographical thought, from research on 'areal differentiation' to feminist, queer, and antiracist geographies and in dialectical approaches (Gilmore, 2002; Smith, 1984, 1992; McKittrick and Peake, 2005; Pratt, 1999; Pratt and Hanson, 1994; Staeheli, 2008). As seen in works such as David Harvey's influential (1996) *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*, Gill Valentine's (2008) much cited article 'Living with Difference', a leading development geography textbook *A World of Difference* (Sheppard et al., 2009), and in the commonly used term 'geographical difference', difference has been linked with geography in such a way as to give the impression that to think spatially is at once to think differentially. Although many geographers acknowledge the importance of difference for geographical thought, there remains much to be gained from thinking through precisely what difference is and how it functions – as an active force in the world and as a key concept in so many of our analytic frameworks (see Jacobs, 2000).

In this paper, we draw out what Gilles Deleuze's idea of 'difference-in-itself' – an ontological view of difference as not negative or contradictory, but as generative and primary– has to offer the field. It is difficult to overstate the influence that Deleuze's writing has had on geography over the past two decades, both with and without his collaborator Félix Guattari. Deleuze's philosophy, often characterized as emergent, creative, relational, affirmative, and resistant to totalizing categories (Bear and Elden, 2011; Bonta and Protevi, 2004; Doel, 2000; Katz, 1996), has transformed geographical thought, inspiring diverse and important research on non-representational theory (Anderson and Harrison, 2010), materiality (Anderson and Tolia-Kelly, 2004; Anderson and Wylie, 2009; Whatmore, 2006), affect (Duff, 2010; Pile, 2010) and affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2008), the assemblage (Dewsbury, 2011;

Dittmer, 2014; McFarlane and Anderson, 2011; Müller, 2015), the event (McCormack, 2003; Shaw, 2012), aesthetics (Dewsbury and Thrift, 2005; Doel and Clark, 2007), non-human geographies (Lorimer, 2007), relationality (Harrison, 2007), and object-oriented approaches (Shaw and Meehan, 2013). Arguably, difference-in-itself ricochets through this vibrant scholarship, since difference remains evident in Deleuze's later concepts created with Guattari that underpin much of this work, including the rhizome, de- and reterritorialization, becoming-woman, smooth and striated spaces, and many others.

Though the influence of Deleuze and Guattari in geographical thought is hard to ignore, it remains rare for geographers to explicitly or extensively tackle Deleuze as a 'philosopher of difference' or to expound precisely and systematically the role of difference in his philosophy. This is the task we undertake in this paper. Of course, there are exceptions. For example, Marcus Doel (1994, 1999) suggests that difference-in-itself and Deleuze's fascination with the production of concepts could work to populate geography with a panoply of new ideas and approaches, through conceptualizing space as 'the differential element within which everything happens; the repetitious relay or protracted stringiness by which the fold of actuality opens in and of itself onto the unfold of virtuality' (Doel, 2000: 125). Similarly, Ian Shaw and Katherine Meehan (2013: 217) explicate the importance of thinking 'the event' in geographical thought, proceeding from Deleuze's conviction that 'all existence consists of difference: to exist is to be productive of difference'. In Section III of this paper we explore in greater detail two further explicit engagements with Deleuzian difference in geography: in the concept of 'flat ontologies' emerging from critiques of scalar thought and in its impact on anti-racist geographies.

Despite the influence of Deleuze and Guattari's thought on geography, critical accounts of Deleuze's influence on the discipline understate the importance of difference in Deleuze's pre-Guattari work (e.g. Doel and Clark, 2004), and it remains less common for geographers to engage incisively not only with difference-in-itself but with many of Deleuze's earlier concepts (including transcendental empiricism, the actual and the virtual, repetition, the production of sense, and more generally his writings on language and

psychoanalysis). Indeed, focusing on Deleuze's later collaborative work, geographical scholarship has tended to subordinate the foundational importance of difference in his solo work, ironically rendering the discipline of geography subject to precisely the critique Deleuze made of philosophy in *Difference and Repetition*: that difference appears only as secondary and subordinate to other concepts. Further, the multiplication of Deleuze's influence, which has proceeded in geography largely without a careful and thorough examination of his concept of difference, means that closer attention to difference affords fresh opportunities for thinking through Deleuzian connections in the discipline. Therefore, we seek to push geographers' engagement with Deleuze further. We aim to show how a Deleuzian concept of difference not only provides tools for a critique of identity and representation but also opens up new ways of thinking and acting. Our contention is that by focusing on difference-in-itself – emphasizing difference as conceptually prior to the construction of identity categories – we can better understand, respond to, and cope with the often violent work that representation and identity accomplish, while also opening up possibilities for new methods of creation and escape that can evade political capture and deterritorialize hierarchies.

But what is difference for Deleuze? Deleuze argues in *Difference and Repetition* that difference is not something that arises between two identities. Instead, he puts forward an idea of what he calls 'difference-in-itself', a concept of difference that comes before identity and is internal to all things (1994: 67). Difference-in-itself is ontological: an irreducible, affirmative difference that swarms within being itself, relating itself to its own differences from within. It is only through mediation that this wild swarm of differences becomes represented as difference between species, races, genders, etc. This subordination of difference-in-itself to a negative ('A' is not 'B') concept of difference occurs through the operations of what Deleuze calls the 'four shackles of mediation' (p. 29) or the 'four iron collars of representation' (p. 262): identity, opposition, analogy, and resemblance. The negative idea of difference – propagated through the judgments that distinguish identities as such, that mark them as distinct from or similar to or analogous

to other identities – is thus parasitical upon and oppressive to the affirmative and productive difference-in-itself. Bound by these four shackles, difference-in-itself becomes harnessed to a conceptual difference that is no more than an operation of homogenization and negation, a question of a measured distance from 'A'. Thus difference-in-itself becomes subordinated to representation and the hierarchical orderings of conceptual difference. Our purpose here is to show how geographies of difference are (and can be further) enriched through an orientation towards (a) the affirmative, material multiplicities of difference-in-itself, (b) the machinic assemblages that take up this ontological difference into systems of representation, and (c) the ways in which difference-in-itself continuously escapes from the iron collars of representation.

Our argument is that a close engagement with difference-in-itself could helpfully extend geographers' current understandings of difference. Geographers have considered difference through identity, exclusion, and embodiment as ways to challenge simplistic or dualistic accounts of difference as either biologically determined or socially constructed and have employed dialectical accounts of difference to develop understandings of the relationships between society and space. These accounts of difference have proved highly productive, sophisticated and complex, but, from the point of view of difference-in-itself, they have a tendency to subordinate difference to concepts such as identity and resemblance, or opposition and contradiction. While the purpose of such critique has often been to show how identity categories and their spatial manifestations are socially and historically constructed, it is difficult for such accounts to get beyond the need for a constitutive outside (external difference framed negatively) for the functioning of politics (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2013). If liberal political thought, supposing to recognize the irreducible rights of individuals irrespective of difference based on an assumed 'universal' human condition, is the ground upon which the foundations of representation and identity are built across a range of contexts, difference-in-itself relates to a moment of ungrounding, communicating that which cannot be thought within the frame of liberalism. Our wager is that, if we follow Deleuze to understand 'a life' as a multiplicity of micro-differences that cannot be subordinated to identities, then we will come to see how

we are affected and affecting one another (and the world) through a multiplicity of microconnections that do not require or are not premised upon identification or opposition (relating difference to difference).

The following sections flesh out this argument for Deleuzian difference in three ways. First, we outline what we see as the two primary ways in which geographers have treated difference, in terms of representational categorization and dialectically, and indicate how these approaches are similar to and differ from a Deleuzian one. Second, we give an account of Deleuze's difference-in-itself, as presented in *Difference and Repetition* and through the concept of the 'faciality machine' with Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. We then examine how this concept has percolated through feminist and anti-racist theory and into geographical scholarship. Third, we probe questions that feminists and queer theorists have raised regarding the relevance of difference-in-itself for political action. We argue that these debates provide a productive tension and catalyst (what Deleuze might call a 'differenciator') for rethinking difference and for imagining new strategies to challenge representation without ignoring the continuing violences incited under representational modes of politics. Finally, we conclude by suggesting that a Deleuzian understanding of difference-in-itself presents political and theoretical opportunities for geographers to challenge the strictures of liberal categories and the representational 'image of thought' (Deleuze, 1994: 131) on which they depend.

II Difference in geography (without Deleuze)

Difference has had a long career in geography. Indeed, it has been a keyword in many of the approaches that have shaped the field. The term 'areal differentiation', for example, denotes a regional geographical approach associated with the description and explanation of similarities and differences between places (Hartshorne, 1939). Feminist geographies brought difference into new relief – with a focus on the politics of difference, identity, and embodiment – often enriched by poststructuralist approaches to power, language, and discourse (Jones et al., 1997; Longhurst and Johnston, 2014; Women and Geography

Study Group, 1997). Certain dialectical understandings of difference brought in through the discipline's long engagement with Marxism continue to influence research trajectories in and beyond its origins in political economy (Harvey, 1990; Massey, 1984). Focusing first on the geographic literatures on power, identity, and difference, and second on dialectical conceptions of difference below, we explain some of the prevailing terms through which difference is thought in geography and suggest productive areas in which a Deleuzian understanding of difference can help expand our geographic imaginations while also bringing more conceptual clarity to the significance of difference as a central geographic concept.

Geographies of power, identity, and difference

For many geographers, an engagement with difference has meant attending to social differentiation and the hierarchical ordering of patriarchal structures, racial formations, and heteronormative arrangements (McKittrick and Peake, 2005). Conceptualizations of difference have facilitated productive engagements with the spatialities of identity and exclusion across the uneven worlds that we differentially inhabit. In some formulations, the focus has been on how existing differences go unacknowledged in geographic analyses – as in feminist geography's work highlighting the exclusion of 'half of the human in human geography' (Monk and Hanson, 1982; also see Mott and Roberts, 2014; Rose, 1993). Taking to task an image of the liberal citizen which assumes an unmarked universality in relation to modes of differentiation (class, race, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability), critics in and beyond geography have argued that this image works to privilege those whose experiences come to stand in for everyone's, while marginalizing or pressuring others to conform to the putatively universal but actually quite specific figure of the liberal citizen (Marston, 1990; Young, 1990). Many others highlight the production of difference in relation to norms, hierarchies, and other relations of power (Gilmore, 2002; Oswin 2010; see also Cohen 1997). Difference in these literatures is produced through processes of territorialization, encounter, and struggle that shape exposure to violence (Catungal, 2015; Shabazz, 2009), construct understandings of sameness

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and difference across groups (Ehrkamp, 2006; Nagel, 2002), and, more broadly, inflect the conditions of subjectivity, intelligibility, and political possibility (Anderson, 1991; Finney, 2014; Hopkins, 2014; Mahtani, 2014; McKittrick, 2006; Pratt, 1998; Thomas, 2011; Ye, 2016).

Difference is also central to contemporary modes of multicultural governmentality in which diversity is managed or marketed toward particular ends (Fincher et al., 2014; Mitchell, 2004). Here the differential incorporation of certain kinds of identities may extend the reach of dominant formations and sustain their power to shape the conditions of life of late liberalism (Ferguson, 2012; Melamed, 2006; Povinelli, 2002). Analysis of these provisional inclusions and partial exclusions has spurred many nuanced accounts of difference in the contemporary moment. Intersectional approaches have been central to understanding this complicated landscape (Hopkins and Noble, 2009; Irazábal and Huerta, 2015; McDowell, 2008; Peake, 2010; Valentine, 2007), even as some have raised questions about the potential for some work on intersectionality to reinstate limiting forms of identitarian thought (Brown, 2012) or to replace an attention to the mutual constitution of forms of differentiation and their lived complexities with an analytic of distinct, if intersecting, forms of oppression (McWhorter, 2009; Noble and Tabar, 2014; Olund, 2010).

A certain kind of difference is undoubtedly produced by normative orderings, structures of meaning, and relations of power. Further, there is nothing inherently immaterial about such analyses of the socio-spatial production of difference (Kobayashi, 2013). Nevertheless, our gambit in this paper is to suggest instead that difference-in-itself is, in an important sense, prior to the institutionalization of conceptual orderings and self-other dialectics. This priorness is more structural than temporal. Borrowing Louis Althusser's (1969: 113) figure of 'the last instance', we suggest that difference-in-itself comes first, but only in an abstract first instance that never exists at the level of empirical phenomena. In the constant shiftings and unfoldings of more-than-human socialities, the produced differences of race, gender, and sexuality, for example, do act back on the swarm of differences out of which they emerge (Massumi, 2002; Puar, 2007). The conceptual priority of difference-in-itself will allow us to develop a perspective that resists being

reduced to those produced differences – without downplaying their continued force in shaping the world. This locates categories and identities within the play of difference-in-itself, and permits a new perspective on the resistance that the classificatory frameworks of conceptual difference meet in difference-in-itself (e.g. Anderson, 2008). Thus, our goal here is not to challenge work on the production of difference, which remains central to much theoretically and politically productive work in and beyond geography, but instead to mobilize Deleuze's thinking on difference to better understand both how social formations continue to reproduce inequality, domination, and violence and how particular differences may escape or confound dominant coordinates.

Dialectical difference

While difference is probably most frequently and overtly encountered in feminist, queer, and anti-racist geographies, dialectical understandings of difference have shown durability in geographical thought in a variety of forms (Dixon et al., 2008; Sheppard, 2008; Secor, 2008), and in spite of considerable criticism (Duncan and Ley, 1982; Jones, 1999). Dialectical difference is typically characterized in terms of an oppositional or contradictory internal relation – generative through its resolution or synthesis of conflicting forces. Difference here is inherent in and explained through the workings of dialectical processes.

The emphases on contradiction, opposition, and negation, generally associated with a legacy of Hegelian thought, initially seem to place such dialectical understandings of difference at a significant distance from difference-in-itself. Deleuze is, at times, highly critical of Hegel (e.g. Deleuze, 1983). However, without collapsing important distinctions or papering over productive tensions, critical scholarship on Hegel and Deleuze has highlighted points of contact between their respective projects (Houle and Vernon, 2013; Somers-Hall, 2012; Smith, 2012). To begin, Hegel and Deleuze both challenge the concept of difference in the history of philosophy, and suggest that representation must be rethought.

While their responses to this problem diverge around the place of the negative, it is worth noting their joint interests and the fact that the Hegelian dialectic is more complicated than many critiques of Hegel have allowed (Gidwani, 2008; Malabou, 2004). As Deleuze demonstrates, a dialectical movement need not always take shape through negation, nor would it make sense, in seeking to think difference beyond contradiction, to simply set a 'good' Deleuzian dialectic in contradiction to a 'bad' Hegelian one. As an alternative, Ruddick (2008) offers an account of a positive dialectic that does not dismiss the value of, for example, a dialectical analysis of the contradictions of capitalism such as that found in Marx, but that also finds in Spinoza (in conjunction with Deleuze and Marx) a more positive dialectic in the dynamics of political struggle.

Key elements of the reception and development of dialectical thought in geography share affinities with the immanent siting and generative tendencies of difference-in-itself. For example, David Harvey (1996) influentially expounds Marx's dialectical materialism as a generative process of internal differentiation. Harvey reads Marx with Leibniz and Whitehead to render the dialectic a non-totalizing and nonteleological force, no longer a Hegelian motor of historical change. Capital, for Harvey, is thus a relational process emerging between circulations of value and stocks of assets (Harvey, 1996: 49–50; see also Castree, 1996). More generally, Harvey's dialectic can be seen processually as an emerging result of an interaction between substances (things, assets) and energy (forces, value) defined precisely by the resolution of conflicting or opposing differences between these terms. Dialectics in Harvey's reading assumes these substances and forces to be defined both by their internal difference and by their emergence as a result of the resolution of these internally contradictory and heterogeneous forces.

Similarly, rather than viewing space as governed by a set of autonomous rules, or merely an expression of 'the social', Ed Soja's (1980, 1989) influential description of a 'socio-spatial dialectic' suggests a mutually generative dependency between social and spatial phenomena, while retaining a primacy of class relations in the capitalist mode of production. Soja argues, through the dialectic, against a causal

relationship between society and space. Difference for Neil Smith (1984) remains a concept based upon dialectical internal differentiation associated with both uneven development and the production of scale. Smith opposes this view to one on absolute space in which difference is absent, unthought or devalued – space as a homogeneous, transcendent, two-dimensional and undifferentiated totality separate from that which occupies and occurs within it. Acknowledging the importance of difference has implicitly allowed geographical thought to critique absolute conceptions of space in favor of relative, relational, topological, and rhizomatic understandings of spatial phenomena.

Thus, at important moments, dialectical difference in geography bears a close connection to Deleuze's concept of difference insofar as it is described as an *internal* differentiation of heterogeneous series, rather than external appearances of difference, which Deleuze will always describe as second-order effects of prior differential processes. Deleuze incorporates a version of the dialectic into his metaphysical system as a characteristic of what he terms 'the Idea', an ironic subversion of an originally Platonic concept (Deleuze, 1994; Deleuze and Parnet, 2007; Dixon et al., 2008; Smith, 2012). Where dialectical difference is generally characterized as contradictory and in conflict, the Idea evicts this conflictual 'mediation' – described as 'the identity of a concept capable of serving as middle term' (Deleuze, 1994: 59) – from the dialectic. Instead, Deleuze characterizes his dialectic as working through the 'problem' essential to the Idea without a presupposed solution (i.e. modeled inevitably on an image of thought or identity of a concept), in which the question of being (ungrounded or unorganized being, still characterized by pure differences) is always put in the place of a problem. Instead of mediation through opposition and contradiction, this dialectic is an expression of univocal being, where 'being' is defined as an equal expression of internal difference for all things, while those things are not necessarily defined as equal. Thus, for Deleuze (1994: 179, original emphasis), '*problems are always dialectical*: the dialectic has no other sense, nor do problems have any other sense', and being as difference, the question of being, or difference-in-itself, 'is said of all in a single sense, but they themselves [individuating differences] do not have the same sense' (p. 36). Though

Deleuze remains a dialectical thinker, difference-in-itself differs from other dialectical accounts of difference since the former does not see internal differences as fundamentally opposed to one another, or communicating through a process of mediation. Instead, Deleuzian difference views preindividual singularities (the points that form a curve, potential forces, single-celled organisms, etc.) as having their own difference that differentiates them first of all and primarily *from themselves* (Deleuze, 1988a, 2004). Deleuze therefore suggests, through this concept of difference, an account of irreducible and internal particularity that always escapes generalization.

In the accounts discussed in this section, reading for difference across feminist poststructuralist and dialectical Marxist approaches, geographers have apprehended difference mainly indirectly. Precisely how difference functions in these contexts has rarely been discussed explicitly. While these respective concepts of difference have advanced the field, not least by allowing researchers to pay close attention to inequalities, exclusions, and violence in a variety of contexts, a great deal of potential resides in more thoroughly opening up the ontological question of difference. In the following section, we further develop this Deleuzian concept of difference-in-itself in order to draw out its significance for geographical research.

III Deleuzian difference without and within geography

In this section we show what difference is for Deleuze and examine the uses of this concept within politically engaged scholarship in and beyond geography. We begin with Deleuze's major philosophical text on difference, *Difference and Repetition*, then bring the concept into greater clarity through the example of the 'faciality machine' found in *A Thousand Plateaus*, written with Guattari. First, we aim to explain what it means for difference to be originary and generative, and, second, we describe how difference becomes taken up by representation and shackled to identity. Next, we draw out how this Deleuzian idea of difference comes to bear on feminist and anti-racist projects.

In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze aims to explain how difference is generative and originary, prior to representation and empirical observation, but also susceptible (though not inevitably) in the final instance to foreclosure in terms set by the shackles of mediation. Deleuze describes difference-in-itself holistically in terms of the development of biophysical life, the production of the unconscious, and the formation of linguistic systems that all proceed first and foremost by means of individual differentiation. Using differential calculus as a metaphysical motif to describe difference as a characteristic common to all phenomena, Deleuze explains why difference covers itself and why it can be subordinated to a dogmatic image: Differentiation as a mathematical operation defines a rate of change in the 'differentiated' function, while erasing any constant particular to that function. Upon integration, what Deleuze (1988b, 1994) will also call actualization, that constant cannot be immediately calculated unless the original function is known. This original function, prior to its generative process of differentiation, is particular to the individual and is invisible from external empirical observation, that is, from the point of view of the integrated or actualized function, which instead has the appearance of givenness.

How does this difference-in-itself, this calculus of internal difference, become an image of thought that proceeds in terms of identity? Deleuze argues that the subordination of ontological difference to representation occurs through the operations of comparison and judgment, selective tests that measure differences against standards of appropriate identity, similarity, resemblance or analogy. Perhaps the most easily grasped example of this operation, within which difference-in-itself is subordinated to representation, can be found in *A Thousand Plateaus*, in the plateau 'Year Zero: Faciality'. 'Concrete faces', write Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 168, original emphasis), 'cannot be assumed to be ready-made. They are engendered by an *abstract machine of faciality (visagéité)*'. The abstract machine of faciality enacts a functional system of connections through which faces (and 'facialized' bodies) become legible, through which the identity and meaning of the subject are assembled. The Year Zero is indicated because Deleuze and Guattari originate this facial/racial organization of power with Christianity and the 'determination of degrees of deviance in

relation to the White-Man face' of Christ (p. 178). Once in operation, 'at every moment the machine rejects faces that do not conform, or seem suspicious' (p. 177). Productive, affirmative, multiplicitous difference is crushed, subjected to the requirements of representation, of measured resemblance and degrees of deviance.

Practically, perhaps the most pervasive way that the faciality machine works in late liberalism is through an identity politics based upon the extension of rights to more and more groups of people as they become 'acceptable' and 'tolerable' to a national or democratic standard. Deleuze and Guattari interpret this as a taming or reduction of difference, a selective process by which acceptable kinds of difference are celebrated as contributing to an identity defined through a discourse of multiculturalism, as 'diversity' that shackles the multiplicity of wild differences to categorical identities. Those bodies that fail the standards set by representation – that the faciality machine rejects – are stigmatized, incarcerated, deported, excluded, tortured, mutilated, or murdered. For Deleuze and Guattari, the problem is not so much that thought is filtered through a concept or image, but that these operations work by placing at the center *one particular* normalizing image of thought (the White-Man face), which has been dominating 'Western' thought for so long that it is impossible for liberal democracy to think difference as anything other than something negative, to be dealt with and managed, to be fit into categories, tables, and forms of statistical calculation. In this context, calls for justice take the form of a cry of sameness ('Others deserve rights/to live because they are more like us than you think!') rather than a much queerer cry of difference-in-itself.

Deleuzian difference, through a process of multiplication of micro, individual differences, pronounces the failure of representation. Although representation is for Deleuze an appearance of superficiality, it is nonetheless that which is *given to experience*, an empirical reality. And insofar as representation is that which is given, Deleuze assigns to difference-in-itself the task of explaining how the given comes to be given as given. Thus difference-in-itself is best expressed in terms of becoming (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) – e.g. becoming-small, becoming-green, becoming-prickly. These differences are

virtual, intensive, and always changing; they are expressed in actual things but also exceed them (Williams, 2013). Difference-in-itself betrays the limits of representation, demonstrating a multiplication of difference beyond organized representational boundaries, and within the gaps and interstices of the calculation of categories.

Representation therefore cannot be seen as docile or passive. Instead, according to Deleuze and Guattari's principles, we can connect with the intensive differences, the pure becomings, that have conditioned and are expressed in actualized representations: becoming-iridescent, becoming-wet, becoming-scaly. Here, difference happens without negation (becoming-fish is not the opposite of something else) and each individual expresses these intensive becomings in a different way, setting them in relation to other becomings (Williams, 2013). Following Deleuze, we can speak of representations as convergent *and* divergent insofar as they resonate with one another and are neither contradictory nor identical but rather 'affirmed through their difference' (Deleuze, 1990: 172). Such an approach undermines the primacy of representational thought by pointing to the conditions of emergence that are not themselves exhausted in representation.

Thus not only does difference come before identity, but it is also excessive of identity. Every limitation or opposition, Deleuze (1994: 50) writes, 'presupposes a swarm of differences, a pluralism of free, wild or untamed differences; a properly differential and original space and time; all of which persist alongside the simplifications of limitation and opposition'. Identities – whether named in terms of gender, race or other categories – must be understood as assemblages composed of the differences that exist apart from (and therefore can escape) the shackles of mediation. As Claire Colebrook writes, '[I]t is only by repressing the highly complex differentials that compose any being that something like the notion of ''a'' race can occur' (Colebrook, 2013: 35). Identity categories paper over the multiplicity of difference-in-itself: a thousand tiny sexes (Grosz, 1994), a thousand tiny races (Saldanha, 2007), a thousand tiny connections

(Dolphijn and Tuin, 2014). In such claims, productive, affirmative difference-in-itself persists, escapes, and reasserts its multiplicity.

The theoretical and political productivity of Deleuzian difference is evident in the work that geographers have done with this concept. Such work has mostly engaged Deleuzian difference to critique of the concept of scale and to augment theorizations of race. Perhaps the most well known of these engagements is the work by John Paul Jones III, Keith Woodward, and Sallie Marston (2007: 265) that has argued for a 'flat ontology' in which space is conceived as 'immanent (self-organizing) event-spaces dynamically composed of bodies, doings and sayings' that are 'differentiated and differentiating, unfolding singularities that are not only dynamic, but also "hang together" through the congealments and blockages of force relations'. As the authors note, their concern with scale is precisely associated with negative difference we have been describing in which scale irretrievably repeats and rehearses a hierarchicalizing logic (Marston et al., 2005). They argue that, no matter how nuanced, the concept of scale cannot be rescued from its deficiencies, and so it would be better to remove it altogether from a geographical lexicon. To put these debates in the language that we have been using in this paper, these authors seek to eliminate a particularly normative 'image of thought' (Deleuze, 1994: 131) or collar of representation (in this case concerning socio-spatial emergence and arrangement) from the geographical discourse. By 'suspending' representational accounts of subjectivity, such an approach allows us to see space as produced through an autonomous differentiation, while a priori rules of organization are not predetermined but instead unfold immanently.

Additionally, Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of race as a machinic technology of differentiation has often been taken up by geographers (Swanton, 2010a, 2010b). Arun Saldanha (2010), for example, thinks through the relevance of Deleuzo-Guattarian difference as it pertains to current theorizations of race. He understands the materiality of race as an immanent event rather than a discursive or linguistic social construction. Saldanha's writing is commensurable with our own, insofar as he critiques

those that universalize the 'human' condition by ignoring the supposed 'small' individual difference of skin color. Saldanha thereby imagines an understanding of race that does not subordinate the material reality of the phenotype to subjective experience. Bodily differences exist materially, prior to their linguistic signification and our conscious comprehension of them, but those 'prior' differences also partially produce that effect of representation or signification. Furthermore, linguistics, representation, and signification may remain the dominant mode through which we consciously apprehend and understand race, but this does not mean that those categories are unchangeable, deterministic, or fully encompass the materiality they dynamically express. This mutually differentiating reciprocity is important, since 'race is a whole event, much more than just a statement, important though that statement might be to the emergence of the event' (Saldanha, 2006: 12). Instead, Saldanha attests to an idea of racial difference as multiplicity beyond the cramped categories and representations that dominate liberal politics and biopolitical modes of governance. Race, thought with Deleuzian or Deleuzo-Guattarian difference, is *radically excessive of the categories that seek to represent it*. And while those categories are nonetheless real (insofar as they influence and produce systems of incarceration, segregation, representation, and, more generally, racism itself), they are not immutable; racial categories never fully contain the multiplicity of difference-in-itself and are therefore always potentially disrupted by lines of flight.

What the many influential and engaging accounts of Deleuzian difference in geography (e.g. Colls, 2012; Saldanha, 2006) have in common is a desire to take difference seriously, to foreground the importance of materiality, and to avoid patterns of thought that subordinate difference to the negative. They see the challenge of a Deleuzian and Deleuzo-Guattarian approach in emphasizing nomadic, creative, and emergent accounts of difference, and also attempting to explain why sexism and racism retain representation as their primary discriminatory organizing principle. Indeed, Jason Lim (2010) comments on how automatically one reads encounters through the lens of representational racial categorization, suggesting that Deleuzian difference can offset this tendency. By questioning bodies in terms of what they

can do, rather than how best we can categorize them, Lim (2010: 2398) argues, 'we are required to suspend our investments in such preconceived ideas about the proper and possible limits of bodies' (see also Caluya, 2008).

Our purpose is not to pitch Deleuzian difference as an alternative political project for feminist, anti-racist, queer, or other geographies. Neither do we mean to imply that Deleuzian ideas of difference have not already been influential in all of these projects, or to underestimate the effort that geographers have made to engage Deleuzian difference in their work. Our point is merely to make clear what such an approach to difference opens up for geographical scholarship. Insofar as difference is central to geographical thinking, it is important for us to think critically about what we mean by the concept, and to clarify its status ontologically and epistemologically. While geographers often rely on an idea of difference as primarily 'socially constructed', Deleuzian difference precedes the representational practices that 'construct' social categories. Deleuze thus affirms difference against structures of racism, sexism, cisgenderism, and other forms taken by the faciality machine. An understanding of difference as affirmative, multiple, and always in excess of its categorical capture may open the possibility of new methods of escape from old forms of hierarchy and violence. If we understand a life as a multiplicity of micro-differences that cannot be subordinated to identity, then we come to see how we are affected and affecting one another (and the world) through connections that do not require or are not premised upon identification or opposition. All of this is reason enough for geographers to experiment with thinking about difference differently. In the following section, we put these ideas to work through an engagement with an ongoing impasse, or productive tension, in critical scholarship around how best to comprehend difference, and the possibilities for political action therein.

IV Debates on difference as 'differenciator'

> To proceed as if the categories *do not matter* because they *should not matter* would be to fail to show how the categories continue to ground social existence. (Ahmed, 2012: 182, emphasis in original)

Deleuze wrote *Difference and Repetition* as a challenge to the dominant ways in which difference has been theorized in the history of philosophy. Of course, Deleuze's work cannot be considered the final word on difference, and, as we discuss in this section, debates in philosophy and beyond continue on how to practically and conceptually understand difference. These debates have systematically resisted and defied neat resolution or clean agreement from scholars. Philosophically, the question tends to concern the ontological priority of difference: Can difference be thought prior to (albeit then later covered by) representation, identity, and sameness? Or is difference always produced alongside and subordinate to a symbolic system that includes representation, knowledge, and discourse? We have, at times, aligned Deleuze's conceptualization of difference-in-itself with the former – for good reason, we believe – and have highlighted the critical leverage such a position has provided to those geographers who have pursued that path. Yet, to leave things as a matter of an opposition between two positions on difference would be to submit to the very logic of contradiction that Deleuze sought to challenge. Doing so would do more to ossify than to open up critical understandings and would ultimately sidestep some of the most important contributions that Deleuze makes through the conceptualization of difference-in-itself. That there is a tension between an 'ontological difference' and difference as socially constructed or ordered in the symbolic is undeniable, but this tension is precisely what we would like to present in this section as a productive *problem without a presupposed solution*, as a characteristic of Deleuze's dialectic Idea described above, rather than one to be resolved in favor of one proposition or another.

Thinking through different accounts of difference – specifically, difference as category or identity, sexual difference, and difference-in-itself, in their complex relations – can compel the creation of new concepts or new modes of thought. In this section we suggest that the productive tension between Deleuzian and other understandings of difference can itself be thought of as what Deleuze calls a 'differenciator' – that is, as a synthetic kernel of difference that sits between two moments of repetition and makes two heterogeneous series communicate (Deleuze, 1994: 117). The differenciator works as a frontier

between two sides, such as between words and things. As a frontier, the differenciator does not relate these two sides into a situation of duality, but instead operates as a line of articulation of difference, not unlike the edge of the two sides of the single-sided figure of the Möbius strip. As a 'paradoxical entity', the differenciator 'guarantees [. . .] the convergence of the two series which it traverses, but precisely on the condition that it makes them endlessly diverge' (Deleuze, 1990: 40). This is a way of understanding how series communicate without identity or opposition but rather ramified in and by their pure difference. Our argument is that ontological difference and socially-constructed difference are ramified in just this way; they are not oppositional to one another but instead in a relationship of articulated difference where they converge by virtue of their divergence.

Thus Deleuze's project in *Difference and Repetition* as we mobilize it here is less a turn toward the ontological in order to trump existing empirical-political categories or identities and more the suggestion for an alternative approach to understanding identities that locates them precisely within the play of difference-in-itself. Locating identity within the welter of difference-in-itself is not to retreat from thinking about representation wholesale, but rather a call to think identities beyond their own terms. We suggest that the repetition of debates on difference – this productive tension between different accounts of difference – can be situated in Deleuze's terms as that imperceptible *something* in the world that forces us to think. This is the very question of difference as not that which grounds the sensible through a coherent system of recognition or representation, but *that which can only be sensed.* For Deleuze, rethinking difference was about achieving a new kind of philosophy, while for geographers, such a pursuit offers an opportunity to consider precisely what is meant and understood when 'difference' is invoked.

That there is much at stake in this debate for geographers is signaled by a recent encounter in which Sara Ahmed (2012) critically engaged an interview conducted with geographer Susan Ruddick (2011) on her recent translation of Pierre Macherey's *Hegel or Spinoza.* In the interview, Ruddick suggests that the book 'provides a kind of metaphysics that helps us move beyond current blockages in thought' by allowing

us 'to build on struggles in a way that embraces and amplifies the capacity to act instead of storying every momentary gain as ''cooptation''', and 'to think beyond the narrow categorizations of gender, race and class (and ableism, ageism, etcetera) to new configurations and alliances' (Ruddick, 2011). Ahmed takes issue with Ruddick's framing of gender, race, and class as 'narrow categorizations' and aligns Ruddick's statement with the possibility that attempting to evade categorization might only serve to ignore those subjected to such categorization. Instead, Ahmed suggests that those categories are less blockages in thought and more blockages in the lives of those who experience their constraints: 'social categories are sediments: they go all the way down, and they weigh some of us down' (Ahmed, 2012: 181). For Ahmed, this is the danger of Ruddick's – in our view – Deleuzian formulation: 'I am suggesting that the hope invested in new terms can mean *turning away* from social restrictions and blockages by identifying restrictions and blockages with the old terms that we need to move beyond' (Ahmed, 2012: 181, emphasis in original). For Ahmed, evading identity and categories ultimately means giving them up by not talking about them, and therefore ignoring the real violences that they perpetuate.

In her critique of Ruddick, Ahmed articulates an important critique of Deleuzian difference. Yet, is it the case that thinking difference prior to identity undermines political projects such as feminism and anti-racism that often remain tied to categories, identity-based organization, and representational modes of politics in general? This question has been subject to significant debate in feminist theory. On the one hand, Elizabeth Grosz considers Deleuze's interest in difference to align with 'feminist challenges to prevailing forms of masculinism in philosophy' (Grosz, 1993: 170). She argues that both Deleuze and feminist theory are concerned with 'a difference capable of being understood outside the dominance or regime of the One, the self same, the imaginary play of mirror and doubles, the structure of binary pairs in which what is different can be understood only as a variation or negation of identity' (Grosz, 1993: 170). On the other hand, many feminist theorists continue to be critical of what appears to be a collapse of the question of sexual difference – that is, of 'the potential for transformation contained by the feminine as the

sociosymbolic location of privileged otherness' (Braidotti, 2011: 91) – into difference in general in Deleuze and Guattari's work through a romanticization of the experiences of oppressed and excluded others in concept like 'becoming-woman' and 'the nomad'.

For some feminists, what is at stake in the critique of Deleuze is Luce Irigaray's project for sexual difference as 'the issue of our time that could be our ''salvation'' if we thought it through' (Irigaray, 1993: 5); as Kiarina Kordela writes, 'Resisting the reduction of everything to pluralism is necessary if we want to continue to have sexual difference now' (Kordela, 2014: 62). Yet the relationship between Irigaray's influential concept of sexual difference and Deleuzian difference is ambiguous, another productive tension. Rosi Braidotti, whose nomadic sexual difference theory reads Deleuze and Irigaray in parallel, argues that 'they are two faces of the same coin', both perspectives that 'predicate the reversal of the tide of dialectical negativity and support an ethics of affirmation and positive desire' (Braidotti, 2011: 114). Indeed, insofar as Irigaray's sexual difference is not a comparison of two opposed entities, but a relation that conditions the possibility of two or many sexes (Irigaray, 1985; Grosz, 2014), sexual difference operates as a 'differenciator' (as we have articulated above) by means of which two heterogeneous series communicate without losing their difference (Deleuze, 1990: 50–1). In short, without reducing sexual difference to Deleuzian difference, or vice versa – indeed, while maintaining their difference – it is possible to put these ideas into a relation that is productive, both theoretically and politically.

Deleuzian thought should not be considered a way to 'get over' or 'get beyond' representation. The notion – popular, we think, among some writers in the discipline – that we are somehow 'over' representation (conceptually or otherwise) ignores the violence of representation itself. Suggesting that we are over representation runs the risk of downplaying the power and violence of the symbolic order to structure experience and subjectivity, and it may, as well, undermine the political possibilities of critical scholarly methodological and epistemological engagement with regimes of representation (Mitchell and Elwood, 2012). Deleuzian difference should not be a call to 'give up' the 'narrow categorizations' of race

and gender, especially insofar as that might also entail 'giving up' the imperative history of critique associated with those very categorizations. Indeed, in contrast to Ahmed's critique, Ruddick's (2010) commitment to the Deleuzian concept of 'ungrounding' in fact provides a rich framework for a close attention to categories and identity (e.g., Ruddick, 1996, 2015). Ruddick's demand is not to ignore or evade the power effects of difference, but instead can be heard as a strategic call to think through – not without or beyond – such categories. Deleuze demands that we give *an account of* representation as a particular 'image of thought' while maintaining that there may be other worlds available and possible, that difference need not always be tied to representation. Accounting for how the given (appearances, representations, which are no less 'real' insofar as they are the culmination of sets of experiences) is given as given is an immediately Deleuzian project, though one that insists that we do not stop there.

Feminist, queer, and anti-racist social theories supposedly pre-occupied with static categories are already attempts to imagine worlds otherwise. One strategy of such projects is to imagine worlds that do not necessarily do away with a politics of identity and representation wholesale (though they might also attempt this), but instead might submit alternative sets of plural representations, ones less associated with a single and totalizing 'faciality' machine. This is what Deleuze might call a strategy of 'infinite representation', consisting in a parodic pushing of identity categories to their limit through multiplication. Though this is a foundational challenge to representation, infinite representation is never enough to emancipate difference from its subordination to the concept altogether. Indeed, Deleuze (1994: 49) remains critical of this strategy, since 'infinite representation does not free itself from the principle of identity as a presupposition of representation'. Yet, we suggest that the project of thinking difference does not have to submit only, inevitably, or once-and-for-all to either an identity-based strategy or a Deleuzian strategy. Reimagining difference should not be a zero-sum game (indeed, to imagine it as such would be already to deny difference in that very reimagining), and the most productive strategies may be to multiply representation to its infinity while also maintaining the conviction that representation itself must always fail

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if difference is ever to be rendered independent from the identity categories that constrain our conceptual repertoire. This might be something close to what Ahmed (2012: 182, emphasis added) means when she says 'a critical task is thus to attend to categories *given that they do not have any ontological ground'*.

The urgency and challenge to (re-)think difference has perhaps never been more pronounced. To contend with difference-in-itself as a concept offers important analytic and political leverage on the radically uneven worlds in which we find ourselves. These are worlds where past and present colonialisms intersect with globally extensive capitalist regimes of exploitation, and where normative orderings of gender, race, and sexuality differentially distribute opportunities and exposure to violence – all amidst unfolding and unevenly experienced ecological catastrophe. In the United States, where the authors of this piece currently reside, these forces have produced and continue to reproduce a racialized system of police violence and mass incarceration, militarized borders, and all too ordinary forms of violence against queer and trans people. These events occur in the context of a system that (partially and provisionally) celebrates the value of 'diversity' and increasingly offers modes of recognition to sexual and gender minorities whose relationships and gender performances pass an approximate test set by a normative order. This representational system of selection, acceptance, incorporation, inclusion, and recognition presents those thinking and critiquing contemporary politics with a problem – a problem to which difference-in-itself seems an apt response – especially since, though the failures of representation announce themselves ever more loudly, the systems that reproduce them nevertheless seem to remain incontrovertibly intact.

V Conclusion

Despite its status as a foundational concept for the discipline, difference – precisely what it is and how it functions – has remained relatively unexamined in the history of geographical thought. Through a trenchant attack on Plato and his successors, Deleuze takes as his primary metaphysical task a critique of the subordinated role difference has played in the history of thought. Deleuze explains both how his

concept of difference-in-itself is generative and primary, and how the violence of representation is able to emerge and persist despite the affirmative understanding that difference precedes those representations. Deleuze's political position (a topic Deleuze rarely discussed directly, his work with Guattari notwithstanding) arises directly from his metaphysical system; Deleuze did not write from a political assumption and build a metaphysical system to support that conviction. Following Deleuze's method, we can draw political conclusions from his metaphysics, which creates space for a philosophy of difference that is a direct challenge to liberal political formations, to representational modes of thought, and to the notion that we can discern the 'truth' or 'essence' of things and phenomena based solely on the empirical presentations they make to the human senses.

We can imagine a reader who gets to this point and objects, 'But Deleuze's "difference-in-itself" is not so different from how I have been thinking about difference'. Our response is that our intended contribution is not staked on the argument that Deleuzian difference stands in opposition to all other understandings of difference. Indeed, we have attempted to set those differences in productive tension as a 'differenciator', to sketch out some of the ways that difference-in-itself resonates with and diverges from other forms of (dialectical, feminist, and poststructuralist) difference. Thus we do not suggest that Deleuzian difference should replace or is necessarily more advantageous than other concepts of difference, though we do hope that we have successfully demonstrated some of its intellectual merits. Instead, the goal of this paper is to affirm that, although geographers tend to leave the subject of precisely what difference is undiscussed, there is a lot of be gained from thinking and talking about difference, especially as more than an effect of other processes or as an empirically existing phenomenon to be explained. The danger of taking difference for granted, or of not fully considering what we mean when we invoke the term 'difference', is that we may re-inscribe an ontology of difference in which opposition, dominance, and hierarchy are naturalized in our very (non)thinking of difference. Through (re)thinking difference, one cannot simply choose to be free of the shackles of representation or the orderings of conceptual

difference; nor, in any case, would we propose the achievement of such freedom as a kind of normative ideal for geographic scholarship. Nevertheless, the reduction of difference to opposition, contradiction, and negation (intentionally or not) risks impoverishing our understandings of the world – a world in which the generative capacity of difference is never exhausted by the categories within which a particular difference is contingently captured. Working with the concept of difference-in-itself offers a more capacious perspective from which to engage with the virtualities within socio-spatial formations, and to pursue the lines of flight that inhere in the constant unfolding of our worlds.

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