

Possible geographies: a passing encounter in a café

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The rise of non-representational theory in human geography has prompted searching questions about how researchers might 'represent' what they encounter in their fieldwork. A central problem is that we reach an insurmountable impasse, an aporia, because we cannot share thoughts, meanings, feelings, etc., in a manner faithful to our experience of them or equally that certain spectacular or horrific events and encounters escape their retelling. We argue that this impossibility should not become a warrant for withdrawing from the world, and instead propose that close descriptions can still be offered of particular encounters, attending in the process to the situated, embodied sense-making work being (unavoidably) undertaken by the peoples involved that makes those encounters what they are. Such work may be threatened by scepticism, because it assumes the possibility of representation being at least partially successful, here and now, and relies on the 'just-thisness' of things. Scholars of social life can, scepticism contained, learn much from taking seriously how any encounter unfolds without transcendental or structural guarantee in the immediacy of the life-worlds where it is made and re-made.

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After representation?

Is the encounter at the heart of fieldwork ultimately unspeakable? Impasses, silences and aporias: these words bring to mind cul-de-sacs, unbridgeable chasms and, as the definition of aporia from *Concise Oxford* (Fowler *et al.* 2004) puts it, finally 'undecidable meanings'.¹ These are the points at which language find its limits, where cultural geography, having so keenly theorized representation, comes upon matters that mark the end of representation: things, events, encounters, emotions and more that are unspeakable, unwriteable and, of course, unrepresentable. It sounds like a threat that it may be all over for the 'cultural turn', but what if we make of that threat a promise instead? A promise of beginning inquiries less fixated on solving or explaining problems in theory *with theory*; a promise to return to just what our wordy worlds have to offer in their shatterproof transparency, their abundant detail and their living motion. It is to

undertake what we have called elsewhere 'undefined investigations' (Laurier and Philo 2004b); which is to say, investigations that do not begin by *defining* their phenomenon, but seek instead to learn from the investigation what defining, describing, proving, caring, observing, sharing, encountering or even breakfast (Laurier submitted) might be.²

Of late there has been a gathering hesitation about human geography's representational focus, a hesitation shared by several different constituencies,³ but most obviously displayed by a number of geographers loosely clustered under the banner of 'non-representational theory' (NRT) as pioneered by Nigel Thrift (e.g. 2000a 2000b 2004 2005). It is already evident that even those most closely associated with NRT offer a variety of moves – influenced by different strands of phenomenology, by Derridean poststructuralism, by experimental writing, by a 'geophilosophical' vitalism, by the 'new' life sciences, etc. – and that diverse 'topics' and 'issues',

from space, movement and landscape to ethics, affect, bodies and all manner of 'remainders',⁴ have entered into the picture for reconsideration or consideration anew. It is also evident that, notwithstanding sympathetic treatments (e.g. Lorimer 2005), there is a measure of suspicion (e.g. Thien 2005; Tolia-Kelly 2006) and perhaps hostility (e.g. Castree and MacMillan 2004) about NRT, not as yet that prominent in print but heard informally. In a short paper such as ours, it is inevitable that we risk caricaturing NRT when arguing for a closeness to and intimacy with social and cultural worlds (Cavell 1996), investigated in their uneventful everydayness and not as an opening for what in conclusion we will refer to as becoming 'Philosophy'. It is also likely that we overstate our own distance from particular twists within NRT, notably those pursued by our prime interlocutor for what follows, Paul Harrison.⁵ And, to be crystal-clear, we should acknowledge at the outset that we *value* what NRT is now bringing to human geography and cognate fields: it has positively challenged us to recast aspects of our own research (Laurier and Philo 2006a 2006b), and in no way do we intend our remarks below to stand as a summary dismissal of NRT from the geographer's table.

What we do want to emphasize, though, is a distinction between, on the one hand, *resistance* to the prioritizing of representation within human geography and, on the other, claims about the sheer *impossibility* of representation *per se*. Resistance to representation and acknowledging its impossibility are two quite different things, and they are worth distinguishing since each alone is of import in assessing the warrants and auspices for cultural geography's enterprise. In the first place, NRT authors are struggling with how best to resist representation given that the last two decades in cultural geography have arguably built an edifice upon it. To put it baldly, the claim is that *all* language is representation, all connection with reality is through representations, and systems of representation have been constructed to mask, distract from and in effect 'serve' ideological interests. Representation, for social theorists, has been used as a metaphysical (and political) critique of 'naive' realism.⁶ Papers emerging from NRT are hence critical of the endless ways in which this notion of representation has dominated cultural geography, and social and cultural research more widely.⁷ Influenced, as we are, by Ludwig Wittgenstein, they see no need to engage in criticism of *existing* representations, nor to

undertake the labour of correcting ordinary language or crafting better representations that will supplant those already in circulation (Dewsbury 2003; Dewsbury *et al.* 2002; Harrison 2002).

But what of the second critical line mentioned above: the apparent impossibility *within* the task of representation? Again to put a subtle idea very baldly, the insistence is that there are things that we (humans) can feel, sense and express that are unspeakable, unsayable and unwritable. Dance, tears, shock, touch, faces, gestures and more that are indeed aporias, puzzling and yet fundamental to life (Lorimer 2005; McCormack 2002; Thrift 2003), but trying to say or write them, so it goes, inherently loses them. If NRT is thereby moving away from a mimetic to an aporetic sense of language, one circling a sense of an impasse that cannot be gotten around, then the further implication *may* be that the work of referring to the world is fruitless. Such an implication would be denied by most NRT authors, since many of their claims are advanced precisely in the name of the singular 'event' whose fragile specificity within the play of heterogeneous multiplicities, always on the cusp of disappearing into the maw of the social analyst's system-building, is repeatedly accented as the 'place' for starting over in fresh versions of human-geographical inquiry. And yet, while loosely equivalent moves seeking to avoid 'putting the last first' – i.e. tethering the abstract-theoretical cart before the fleshy, lively, kicking empirical horse – lead quickly to immersion in the stuff-filled substance of the world (think of Michel Foucault's attention to 'concrete details': Laurier and Philo 2004a; Philo 1992), it might be objected that NRT continually defers this moment of encounter. Thus, just as Harrison (2002, 489) steers us towards what appears to be a concern for the 'rough ground' of practical life, away from what Nietzsche (1977; also Philo 1992, 40) diagnoses as the pull to 'eternals' and 'essentials', he also – brilliantly, troublingly – inserts a layer of philosophical complexity, a maze of aporias, essaying the impossibility of researchers ever being more than hopelessly behind, after the event, disingenuously convening representations of things that cannot but elude them.

In effecting such a move, moreover, it may be that NRT is also retreating from rather than 'appealing to ordinary language against itself' (Cavell 1995, 96); and that NRT celebrates the ordinary but is rarely surprised by it,⁸ not at least in a fashion readily appreciated by its chief audience (let us

say other human geographers). Our alternative is to accept representation as one of many possible expressive practices, one correlate of which is greatly to expand our understanding of the terrain of representation *beyond* the word, spoken or written (something we see in research on materiality, embodiment and so on). But, this claim must be taken with care, because we are precisely not then suggesting that *everything* be regarded as representation: that everything taking place is really one manifestation, symbolization or whatever of some all-encompassing representational economy from which humans cannot escape (which would be to echo the worst excesses of certain strands in cultural studies). Instead, our view is that very many practices are indeed *not* representational, *and* moreover that many elements of language-in-use, particularly but not exclusively as it tumbles forth in routine conversations, are not representational as well. In saying where you are when you answer a mobile phone call, for instance, you are formulating your availability *and* what can be done in the next few minutes (Laurier 2001), working out jointly with your interlocutor what could possibly be said next in the tricky task of keeping the conversation going. Much of the work that language does – certainly in everyday contexts, such as stating, telling, declaring, bemoaning, joking and so on – disappears if we always regard these specificities as subsumed by their representational work. Or, to put things another way, such specificities can only be cast as ‘representational’ if we extend the meaning of representation to the point of meaninglessness. Perhaps unexpectedly, then, while on the one hand allowing an expansion of (what we understand by) representation, to include many non-wordy practices, we are on the other hand simultaneously proposing a dramatic narrowing of the concept as well, so that we wait and see whether the wordy practices that we encounter are representational events after all.

It is also true that excuses made, stories told, tears shed or shared laughter may never succeed in fully capturing what an individual means, feels and thinks that they mean or feel, thereby opening precisely that (chrono)logical ‘interval’ which Harrison (2000, esp. 503; also Thrift 2000a) takes as the starting-point for non-representational critique. We worry that through that gap scepticism squeezes its way back into our inquiries. Our appeal and our draw is toward the ‘chat’ that continues, as part and parcel of that uneventful intimacy of everyday being wherein ‘we’ all routinely hope that our efforts to be

together with others *will* achieve something in acting with, without and for others; whether in a public procedural guise (e.g. the *barrista* sold us a coffee) or by evoking a measure of empathy or understanding in those who we encounter (a colleague, a student, a partner, a friend: see also Parr *et al.* 2005, 97–9). Therefore, we seek to re-find (to re-research) the wonder of perfectly everyday events, full of possibilities, representational and non-representational, offering not so much a different direction to as almost another ‘mood’ from the impossible geographies of the non-representational.

In the ceaseless rushing along of working life, our privilege and point as researchers is that our job *can* be to take the time to examine details-at-hand which, in painstaking ways, will teach us about representation.⁹ Representation, the grand concept, can be investigated as *representing*,¹⁰ really quite practical work that we meet in a myriad of worldly activities, bound up with defensible and contestable uses of referents, persons standing for things, things standing for persons, things standing for other things, and so on (Latour 1992 1997). Considering an actual encounter, event or occasion will seem pointless if we assume that we either already know what is representation (*a priori* and reductively) or we accept that imaginary events and places will be sufficient. By imaginary, we mean the ‘just so’ examples that we sometimes use in discussing and thinking about, for example, what people do in cafés. Indeed, our imaginations are limited not just by our personal foibles, but also by what we can commonly agree is likely, regardless of whether it is actually so in a particular case. By way of contrast, the world is inexhaustibly detailed and full of surprises that are only revealed in engagements with it in its specificity, not in the toy-example demonstration.

Before we find ourselves being accused of sorting out conceptual problems by stating the facts or testing hypotheses, however, an engagement with empirical matters is therefore necessary. This move is not for such empiricist or even positivistic reasons as showing that representations refer to something ‘real’, what Edwards *et al.* (1995) call ‘death and furniture’ demonstrations; instead, the importance of such a move, be it field-based, archival, musical, statistical or laboratory, is to do with retrieving the ‘missing what’ of ethnomethodology (Laurier 2001). In what follows, then, we will briefly explore an instance of language-in-use, showing that language is *both* orderly and ordering at source, drawn from a

typical encounter in a very ordinary place, to remind us that there is much to learn from continuing to revisit the places that (we assume) we already know (about). More specifically, we wish to look at an encounter where a 'telling-off' occurs to present the worldly logic by which such a telling-off gets done here and at this time, being recognized as such by the participants who negotiate what can be done with this mutual recognition.¹¹

A café encounter

Cafés, sometimes quiet, sometimes buzzing and sometimes empty: we have been investigating these places because events happen there, encounters occur there day-in, day-out (Laurier and Philo 2006a). Thinking about cafés brought us to appreciate that there are a *diversity* of encounters: with friends, acquaintances, neighbours, strangers and staff. There is an ordinal logic to encounters, in that they have qualities according to whether they are for the *first* time, where their first time status is a special characteristic, a second time, a third or more, where their 'specialness' usually declines. Let us make that distinction for a start – a first time encounter from a second or a third. Clearly, there is a point where encounters positioned in a sequence fall away from relevance for participants ('it was the twenty-fourth time I bumped into him in Starbucks'). Before we shift to our description of an actual encounter, we must also note the distinction between *arranged* encounters (e.g. business meetings, 'blind dates') or *chance* encounters (e.g. having to share a table, making small talk in the queue). Each possible formulation and categorization of an encounter comes with different consequences and expectations; and, with this in mind, let us now close in on a question: 'how is it that any person could go about working out what kind of encounter they are having at the time they are having it?' While this might not appear to be a live issue, consider what happens when you meet someone who you do not recognize, but who nevertheless claims that this is the second time you have met. Do you not spend considerable time and effort settling the matter?

Rather than using imagined scenarios any further than to draw readers into a topical terrain, here now is a first encounter between EL and another customer in a café:

'Don't bite your nails,' says a voice out of the corner as I'm faffing around on my laptop with the formatting

of my research journal. It's the woman from the table across from me – the one with the fur hat.

It takes me a moment to focus. She has stopped by my table on her way out of the café.

'Don't bite your nails. I was watching you,' she says again.

'Eh, well it stops me smoking,' I finally reply, a bit disconcerted since I'm supposed to be the nosy one here. She laughs a little.

'Well you'll have to stop or it'll be, eh, bitter almond on your fingers.'

'Oh yes bitter almond,' and I laugh a little too. Seeing and then trying not to focus on the little beard and moustache that she has and that I can now see close-up.

'Well I try not to but when I'm concentrating on something I tend to . . .'

She glances at the screen of the laptop. I worry briefly that she'll read what I've been writing about but then realise that I've shifted pages so it's not on the screen.

'They're great these laptops aren't they,' she says.

(Excerpt from field journal, February 2003)¹²

In any such first encounter in a café, we cannot know at the time whether it will be the beginning of an acquaintanceship, based perhaps on both being regulars at this café. Nor, relatedly, can we be sure whether it will be a likely one-off meeting in the way that characterizes so many encounters in the city; but remember that all of our closest friendships and working relationships began with a first encounter wherein, at the time, there was no way of knowing the future that would follow. An encounter can therefore carry with it the mild anxiety over its importance, its orientation to the future; and, if you have talked to another regular customer *once* in the café, from then on rights (and the possible pleasures and annoyances) of subsequent recognition follow.

There is a kind of impasse here that the woman customer has solved. You fancy chatting to a customer who you have never met before in the café, but by the conventions of city life you cannot randomly begin to talk to another; rather, you must have a *reason* of some kind for starting a conversation with them, the most obvious and powerful being that you have met before and thus you can already claim to be acquainted. But here and now, before you is a café full of customers who you have

never met. If you cannot just say 'hi there!' to people at random in cafes – they will ask, 'do I know you?' – how can you get an encounter started with them if, say, you do not have an 'accident' to use (bumping into one another, spilling coffee on someone)? The risks are that we may appear disrespectful, invading someone's privacy (in public places), soliciting, chatting up, conning or 'mad', and a further risk is that we may be rebuffed. We do not have the space here to deal fully with the uses of a 'crowd' (Laurier and Philo 2004a); but two quick points are, first, that amongst the 'old' crowd of this café, EL was noticeably younger, even though in his 30s, and secondly, he had noticed the woman previously because she was wearing a fur hat in a well-heated department store. Nor do we have the space to deal fully with how EL noted down at the time both her fur hat and her facial hair as possible signs of eccentricity or mental illness, a noting that we realize is itself highly problematic (in the light of other research by CP: e.g. Parr *et al.* 2004). Let us just register these small details for the time being.

In the fieldwork vignette, the fur-hatted woman used two 'observables' about EL: the nail-biting and the laptop on his table. One way for her to initiate some talk with this 'stranger' – although 'other customer' is really the more setting-relevant identity here – was to take EL's nail-biting as a resource to build a standardized relational pairing of what kind of person is talking to what other kind of person. That is, it is not just *anybody's* job to do tellings-off or the giving of advice in public places, it is only a certain person's responsibility to make such comments (e.g. 'elders and betters', or perhaps other relevant kinds of persons such as 'locals', 'staff', 'police'). This does not mean that such persons always will do a telling-off, jokey or otherwise, only that they can do so after having themselves analysed the scene to locate their position within, for instance, a 'moralized' paired relationship of *elder* to a *younger*.

How is it that what happened can be cast as a playful telling-off? We would suggest a *serious* telling-off would be invited by, say, blowing cigarette smoke in the face of a nearby customer, smashing bottles in the street or putting your feet on the seats of a railway carriage; and a serious telling-off would get its force not only from that to which it was responding, the 'unreasonableness' of another's actions, but also from how it was delivered and then backed-up. Biting your nails is of a lesser order than many infractions, but it is still something that

can, on occasion, be the subject of a reprimand from a person finding themselves to be in the relationship elder to younger. Moreover, there is the possibility that a *regular* of a café, someone for whom the café has become one of *their* places, albeit in a different way to their home residence¹³ or desk at work, may have acquired situated 'rights' to do a telling-off in public of a *new* customer (e.g. 'you're standing in the wrong place to pay'). Indeed, a telling-off in this vein verges on advice from the 'knowing' to the 'unknowing'.¹⁴ As an aside, these senses of possession over and responsibility for public places have interesting corollaries, and invite comparisons with places, the street perhaps, where people rarely feel sufficiently proprietorial to tell-off unknown wrong-doers or offer advice to visitors, tourists and new arrivals.

While stretching away from this particular encounter, we can also speculate on whether this woman who does the mildly humorous chiding of EL, when initiating an encounter, can obtain something comparable to what we have gained from it. Her initiation of an encounter evokes a prospective accountability in that she has made something happen. Where nothing very much was happening, she has produced an event, a minor one admittedly but still a 'something' to tell later. A wife can go home to her husband and talk about the 'young man' who she teased in the café today. An event like this holds value for those of us who are in danger of having lives where, when asked 'what did you get up to today?', have no story to tell. These questions are part of regular pointed inquiries during problematically categorizable periods of our life, such as unemployment, retirement, bereavement and old age, which may raise the concern of significant others as to whether we are still active, busy, getting out of the house and so on.¹⁵ For EL's part, this encounter holds value since he has an event to record in his field journal: even with encounters being at the heart of human geographical inquiries, uneventful fieldwork is a common part of any project. For our joint purposes, this encounter has realized its worth as the focus for discussion in an academic paper.

A further impasse that keeps us from talking to strangers is the worry that we may get stuck beside/with another person when the conversation runs dry, becomes boring or various other hazards of sociability arise. We can and do start conversations using features that may, if necessary, assist us in 'getting out' of the encounter (in several senses). In

this case the woman is in motion, leaving the café, walking towards an anticipated destination, the exit, and her course of bodily, oriented action has its projectable and anticipated conclusion that plays its part in accomplishing the end of the conversation with EL (Laurier 2005; Mondada forthcoming). The woman in the café is visibly underway in her leaving of the café, not heading towards the seat across from EL to begin her stay at the café, which might have held for both her and EL the promise of further, maybe protracted conversation. In what she is venturing, it is understood by both her and EL to be a *passing* conversation, and this is how she uses her 'going on' to avoid any impasse. When we look at what is occurring in the café, what we can apprehend is how it is bound to what we can do next on the basis of what we see already underway, and what we can do is indeed done with a sense of how we will be held accountable for what we are doing (these are classic ethnomethodological concerns: Garfinkel 1967; Sharrock and Anderson 1986). By the woman's signalled course toward the café door, following the close of her time sitting drinking coffee, what she is saying to EL is formulated, even more precisely than passing comments, as parting remarks. It clearly does not bear the consequences of opening remarks made at the outset of sitting and sharing a table with another customer (Cavan 1966; Laurier *et al.* 2001).

We will have to depart from recounting this story of a café encounter without yet having finished a full analysis of it, but hopefully some flavour has been given of how we might speak of it later in terms of speech that was inextricably involved in making sense of and assembling what was happening at the time. Practices of (in this case unsolicited) advice-giving and/or telling-off display a relationship to a place, create the possibility of *beginning* a public relationship and on particular terms as an older to a younger or a wiser to a beginner.¹⁶ In various ways from this café vignette we can see how an encounter is 'got going' and how it is bound up with a concern for its *speakable* qualities or 'storyable' characteristics (Sacks 1992a 1992b), as well as gesturing to the differing kinds of 'projects' that we have as older married woman and ethnographers studying cafés.

Becoming philosophers, becoming geographers

Uncertainty and scepticism bedevil the inquiries that follow from an encounter like the one we have

described: was that what we *really* saw, and how can we be sure that the woman was seeking stories to tell later? It is a 'natural' inquiry into what *anyone* can see happening in public places, and at the same time it is an exercise in the grammar of uncertainty rather than of, say, impossibility. It is not that we treat what actually happened in the encounter as one about which it is impossible to have the final word, but that we treat a first encounter with someone as ripe with uncertainty and speculation. The woman might be just being friendly because she is lonely or she might be mentally ill, which is another possible version of what happened that we have not pursued here, one that we would resist but it might be advanced (Cuff 1980; Smith 1978). At the same time, our (ethno)inquiry into what an ethnographer can see in a public place turns upon the methods that any competent participant in everyday life, any 'member' in ethnomethodological terms, routinely deploys to see events in cafés and to tell stories about them later (Sacks 1992a). Thus, the woman in the café does not halt in the face of the impossibility of speaking either *in* her encounter or, we conjecture, *of* her encounter later; and neither do or should we. The question may then become what is it that she, we, all of us are doing when we tell stories like these, which are of the order: 'here's what I saw and wasn't it slightly odd? Well, what was going on there today?'¹⁷

The desire to know *more* of public encounters than we *normally* know is endemic to the sceptical treatments usually given by social scientists of such encounters and, more generally, of conduct in public places (Hester and Francis 2003). When these investigators declare themselves to have reached an impasse, it is likely because they feel unable to decide whether the empirical evidence before them – for instance, of elderly people gossiping in a department-store café – can verify or not their theories of, say, the contemporary version of a Habermasian public sphere or the performance of Goffmanesque 'staged' relations in public (as discussed in Laurier and Philo 2006a 2006b). Yet, when we declare that we reach an impasse on what the woman was *really* 'up to', this is an ordinary impasse reached in how we retrieve these witnessed events, these moments in our experience of public city life, as would anybody looking in on such a fleeting café encounter. The commitment still remains for us to document encounters in and of the places of and in such encounters,¹⁸ while at the same

time examining the conditions that make such documentation intelligible, possible and reasonable. Insofar as we, the authors of the present piece, do reach impasses – of theoretical inference; of confidence about a particular person's 'real' motives – they are not really of the kind disconcerting NRT. Sometimes what we are studying is so commonplace, so uneventful, so devoid of immediate drama or serious consequence,¹⁹ that little seems to hang on whether the words spoken by our subjects 'fall short' of expressing what they 'really' experience, mean and intend. Yet language is not so often 'on holiday' as even Wittgensteinians might anticipate, and we remain open to how elegantly, wonderfully and morally charged asking someone 'is this seat taken?' can sometimes turn out to be. In this respect, then, we are not so far at all from NRT.

But let us backtrack a moment, and ponder what is at stake when Harrison (2003 2005 2006a) prioritizes extreme human experiences, ones full of suffering, pain and fear such as felt by subjects of torture or inmates of Auschwitz. In such instances, it is obvious that the interiority of the awful experiences here, as suffered bodily and psychologically by the people concerned, passes well beyond what words can say or even gestures express. Without for a moment wishing to deny the need to foreground such experiences in certain streams of critical human geography, and hence to wrestle with situations where words truly do 'fall short' and 'ring hollow', a question arises about whether the conclusions reached by Harrison (and by NRT) necessarily hold if we stick with a ground intimate to us that is hardly very 'rough' at all, as in our cafés. Is it possible that, without the drama, the claims to be registered about routine events (what can be called the 'uneventful') – dull, grey, often relatively pointless, maybe quite inconsequential, at least in their singular instancing – cannot lead back, or do not have to lead back, to what is still, at root, a serious desire to become philosophical that traverses Harrison's papers? We end up posing to our surprise a Deleuzian question for non-representational theorists, can you become geographers? Or is NRT more tightly bound to becoming philosophy?

Socrates used aporias to force his students to confront their ignorance, to show that some puzzles were unsolvable or confusing, and to invite his audience to adopt an attitude of humbleness and awe at the wonder of the world (Phillip 2001). Alongside aporias, so goes the story of Socrates, there was also a push toward the mundane and

near-at-hand, arguably finding ways of approaching ideas that would not begin with the ideas first and matters at hand afterwards (in the Platonic tradition if not always faithful to Plato).²⁰ Writing about Gunnar Olsson's work some years ago, CP remarks that:

I cannot help but see the box marked 'Philosophy' as floating in a strangely unmoored manner above the much less box-like, much less neatly compartmentalised, regions of the everyday world: a realm of mess and fuss, chaos and charm, joy and despair, power and resistance, difference and desire . . . [I]t might be that questions about (say) epistemology, ontology, and morality can best be answered, not by consulting the exalted words of the great philosophers, but by examining the everyday epistemological procedures, ontological assumptions, and moral judgements being made by specific peoples situated in specific times and places. (Philo 1994, 245)

Having learned from Olsson about the impossibility of language being the representational success that convention demands it to be, given its rigidities before a reality in which 'bats' can often be 'mice' and *vice versa*, this statement entails a 'sigh' about then proceeding – again and again – to revisit the claims of 'big P' Philosophy, rather than looking elsewhere. It voices the wish to become something else, to encounter something else, becoming a geographer perhaps. On just such a basis, we prefer to turn towards the jumble of everyday life-worlds, the places where people have no choice but to 'get on with it', and in so doing are, from time to time, representing 'something', however poorly, to others around them, in words and deeds, sayings, storyings and associated gestures, grimaces and vocal modulations.²¹

The quote immediately above chimes well with the Wittgensteinian return to ordinary language drawn upon by Harrison (2002 2003 2006a 2006b) and other non-representationalists (e.g. Thrift 2000a). Where they retain a preoccupation with the representational aporia as that which cannot be bypassed because every route about, around, to one side, over or under it is doomed to failure, our preoccupation is with the muddy paths, carpeted corridors, spaces between the tables and thrumbing motorways that *are* found. Even though we are abandoned on them, once our feet (or tyres) are on their ground we take them on as ours, as interesting, as worthy and worth investigating. These are what we have called (somewhat clunkily) 'ethno-archaeological' routes (Laurier and Philo 2004a) predicated on close attendance to 'what's happening

here', and to the socio-logics of ordinary practices be they representing or otherwise – not just in our comfortable cafés, and maybe even in the face of terrible adversity – inevitably, unavoidably, necessarily integral to the intelligibility of these worldly moments. Arguably, then, as researchers, we wish to inhabit what Michael Joyce, an analyst of networks and hypertext, has called 'aporetic space', for us something grounded in encounters great and small, as 'the space of doubt, scepticism, and consideration which eventually yields *possibility* [our emphasis], valorisation, persistence and meaning'.²²

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Notes

- 1 This paper was originally prepared for a conference session on the theme of 'Im-passable Geographies', the brief for which ran as follows:

Geographers have always placed the encounter at the heart of their work, be it the encounter with landscape, the other, or the even the tradition itself. However, many different theoretical perspectives converge, at the vanishing point as it were, on the ultimately unspeakable nature of such encounters and thus admit to an impossibility within and resistance to the task of representation. As human geography struggles to go beyond the limitations of positivism and constructivism this aporetic has come to the fore in recent approaches to and accounts of embodiment and performativity. This session seeks papers which engage with such shattering encounters – be they with text, bodies, or landscapes – for the sake of doing justice to our im-possible geographies. (Elden and Harrison 2003)

- 2 The convenors of the conference session (see note 1) drew their notion of aporia from Derrida (Harrison personal communication 11 August 2006), and so we can flag one deconstructionist definition of 'aporia' as

the sense of a final impasse or paradox: a point at which a text's self-contradictory meanings can no longer be resolved, or at which the text undermines its own most fundamental

presuppositions . . . leading to the claim that the text's meanings are finally 'un-decidable'. (Baldick 1996)

- 3 Feminist geographers inspired by strands of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy (e.g. Bondi 2005, esp. 437–8; Rose 1999) have made a related move, in part through recovering the unconscious acting 'beneath' the realm of cognition and its representational constructs. Varieties of both emotional geographies (e.g. Davidson *et al.* 2005) and performative or practice-based geographies (e.g. Lorimer 2005; Nash 2000) are arguably implicated here as well, while Olsson's (1980 1991) poetic-surrealist geographies have long been setting their face against simplistic assumptions regarding the representability of the world.
- 4 As in the many 'things' that remain after the 'cultural' and the 'social' have been, as it were, accounted for (Harrison 2006a).
- 5 Our piece here has been partially crafted in response to Harrison's '*How shall I say it . . . ?*' paper, which has itself been through several versions (Harrison 2003 2005 2006b) in the course of which it has arguably become less about the limits of representation and more about the limits of relationality.
- 6 We are paraphrasing comments made by Lynch (1993) on both constructivist theories and ethnomethodology's different departure from that of deconstruction.
- 7 There is a longer-standing critique of the 'correspondence' theory of language (from amongst others Blum and McHugh 1984; Garfinkel and Sacks 1970; Wittgenstein 1953), as well as a parallel critique, perhaps of more relevance here, directed at representation (Lynch 1994b).
- 8 We should acknowledge that over the mutations of Harrison's '*How shall I say it . . . ?*' paper (2003 2005 2006a), he has increasingly refined his argument to take seriously how the imperfection of people 'representing' their own experiences, particularly ones replete with suffering *beyond* words, is itself central to acts of 'communication' (is arguably the very ground for that communication). Similarly, in the likely *inadequacy* of an interlocutor's response to suffering, albeit a response that 'we' are usually impelled to make, however badly, Harrison finds intimations about the ultimate *non*-relationality of 'thee and me', thereby broadening to a critique of the recent stress upon relationality within human geography.
- 9 The demand that we consult local experts and practically competent members has come from Latour (1999) in ethnographic studies of science and technology; and from Lynch (1994a) and Garfinkel and Wieder (1992) as 'Sack's gloss'; and, albeit rather differently, from Foucault (Laurier and Philo 2004b) in how he does his histories of reason, sexuality and discipline, where he effectively brackets reason, etc., and turns to history to respecify these classic topics as non-transcendental and not-metaphysical.
- 10 Here in the spirit of Wittgenstein
replac[ing] the Cartesian concept of 'thinking' by detailed study of lots of different mentalistic verbs – introspecting,

calculating, remembering, intending – each of which demands its own social setting. (Hacking 2002, 218)

11 Echoing here Blum and McHugh's analysis of snubs:

this paper presents (a) rules for seeing snubs, (b) a grammar in terms of which snub is applicable, (c) a community in terms of which snub is conceivable; and presents these only with the intention of making reference to our game, i.e., to speak that which makes *possible* [our emphasis] our analysis. (1984, 122)

12 The longer journal entry continues:

'Hmm yes. Small enough to fit onto a table.'

'My husband has one but I prefer the other one.'

'Oh really.'

'Oh yes, but the laptops are good aren't they.'

'Well they do most of the things that the full size ones do.'

'Yes, incredible, my husband writes his lectures on them.'

'Hmm.'

'My son's an architect and he has one too and when he's at the house then he and my husband spend their whole time on them.'

'Do they?'

'Yes, I think I'll have to get one too,' we laugh.

There's a pause . . .

'Well remember, don't bite your nails.'

'Really I'll try not but it's hard not to,' I say and we laugh and she moves off.

. . .

I do hate the fact that I bite my nails. She's right, but the longest I've managed was a month before finding myself chewing away on my fingers again. It's a disgusting habit but is bound up with me concentrating on lone work. Going over to tell someone off seems a remarkable event to me. Is this what happens in the department store café? You are under the jurisdiction of the elderly ladies who come here? Well hardly. Also she was being friendly even as she told me off.

13 See Stokoe's (2003) incisive work on the use of the category 'young single woman' in the context of neighbours having disputes; and also in an analysis of the neighbour's entitlement to complain about the duration and intensity of visible activities such as bad cooking smells, hanging out washing and slamming doors (Stokoe and Benwell 2006; Stokoe and Wallwork 2003).

14 Our thanks to Kathleen Haspel for sharing various field stories of being 'told off' in New York for doing things in *this* particular place incompetently.

15 See, for instance, the projections of old age offered in Haim (2002), reporting research based on interviews carried out in cafés.

16 Writing on snubs, McHugh *et al.* (1974) say of a greeting by the already acquainted that it 'creates the possibility of acknowledging a public relationship', and a second encounter cannot but have its possibility in a first meeting such as the one described here.

17 Here we might build on Sacks' (1992b) analysis of a woman describing what she reckoned might have been the aftermath of a robbery at a department store where she worked.

18 We arguably also have a professional obligation because of the (kind of) academic research that we do, as social scientists interested in contemporary public/social life, and we might further configure here an ethico-political imperative tied up with our own visions of the future 'convivial city'.

19 The singular encounters and forms of inhabitation of the public places that we document are for the most part 'trivial' in themselves, holding little significance and carrying scant consequence for the ongoing individual lives concerned, but taken *together* their cumulative weight enables us to arrive at 'larger' claims – advanced circumspectly, but advanced all the same – about the practical conduct of social life within settings affording more or less opportunity for conviviality, the accomplishment of a low-key 'affective democracy' and, indeed, the making of tolerant, live-able but lively cities (Laurier and Philo 2006a 2006b; also Thrift 2005).

20 The self-reflective school put it thus:

Socrates introduced the analytic tactic of examining near-at-hand and mundane examples in order to fasten the mind on the essential features of a problem which the example covers over. Yet his interlocutors invariably resisted this strategy on the grounds that they did not see the connection between the mundanity of the examples and the idea towards which he was leading them. They did not see that the example neither described nor defined the idea, but served instead to re-route the mind so as to approach the idea in a way that was unencumbered by the conventions of ordinary formulations. (McHugh *et al.* 1974, 109)

21 We do acknowledge that to an extent in the very making of such a claim, and in effecting a distinction between 'rough ground' and 'big Philosophy' that itself depends upon appeal to a range of theoretical positions, many only dimly viewed in the text itself, we end up occupying much the *same* meta-level of debate as the NRT authors. Perhaps, though, we are always trying to 'look down' from this meta-level to the jostle of our cafés, whereas the NRT authors, for all their commendation of looking down, do tend to migrate towards the philosophy and ethics sections of the library. At bottom, it is these different responses that motivate the present paper, although our view is that it is not a matter of 'either/or' (either NRT's route or another) but rather 'both/and'.

22 From <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/lo1/Joyce/M.Joyce.OtherMinded.lo198/OtherM18.html>, accessed September 2003.

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