Theorizing Power, Difference and the Politics of Social Change: Problems and Possibilities in Assemblage Thinking

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Introduction

This special issue of *Studies in Social Justice* explores the potential of assemblage thinking for apprehending contemporary social movements and the relations among them across global time and space. It grows out of a 2016 symposium sponsored by Brock University's Social Justice Research Institute, entitled, *Global Movement Assemblages: Continuities, Differences, and Connectivities*. The symposium's aim was to deploy assemblage thinking to make better sense of the wave of popular democratic uprisings since 2010, while also considering its risks, limitations and possibilities.[1]

Derived from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "assemblage" names the coming together of heterogenous social, biological, technological and other elements that co-function in provisional wholes in which the behavior of the constituent parts is *conditioned but not determined* by the

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[1] Many of the symposium's presentations and discussions are available in video format in the Social Justice Research Institute folder of the Brock University Digital Repository, at https://dr.library.brocku.ca/handle/10464/13525. They may also be viewed on the Social Justice Research Institute YouTube channel at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCxft54OV8CVqSBewcVf3P7w.

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whole and whereby the parts never lose their own integrity, their own difference. The assemblage acts through the emergent and distributed agency of its parts, human and non-human, through the composition of forces and the relationality they enact.

We propose that the concept of assemblage aptly describes the post-2010 movements as they are, that is empirically. In addition to appreciating the dispersed character of these movements, the notion of assemblage affords the possibility of theorizing the agency of other, non-human elements in their constitution, including digital technologies, local ecologies, and the built environment. As such, assemblage thinking can help effect a break with mainstream approaches in social movement studies and their onto-epistemic commitments to unity, which inhibit their making sense of such emergent or spatially and temporally dispersed actions. Moreover, as a form of "post-poststructuralist thought" (A. Escobar, personal communication, February, 2017), assemblage thinking also breaks with the latent positivism of dominant approaches in acknowledging that the choice of interpretive lenses and concepts conditions the *kind* of sense we make of these movements and of their political potentialities.

The ongoing wave of popular democratic uprisings, beginning in 2011 with the Arab Spring, the Indignados, and Occupy, have been conceptualized in various ways as related phenomena and as signifying newness. They are commonly understood as having emerged in the context of the 2008 financial crisis, resisting deepening neoliberalization, reflecting a generalized crisis of representative democracy, and demanding social justice, democracy and dignity (e.g., Glasius & Pleyers, 2013; Castells, 2015). We are not satisfied that these understandings, nor the current theoretical and conceptual vocabulary that we have for speaking about movements, are adequate. We contend that the dominant frameworks fail to capture the political force of contemporary movements while also perpetuating several problematic assumptions. These include a Eurocentric conception of the global and a state-centric definition of politics and movement outcomes. They are oriented by unacknowledged teleologies, such as the inexorability of modernization or democratization. They remain trapped within the terms of Eurocentric modernity in the subjects, discourses and utopias that they privilege. Middle East scholar Mojtaba Mahdavi, for example, has critiqued the neo-Orientalism of much commentary on the Arab Spring. In the same vein, Hamid Dabashi has contended that the term "Arab Spring" reinforced a categorial distinction between "Europe" and "non-Europe" on one hand, and between Arab and African on the other. The term effaces commonalities among uprisings in southern Europe and the MENA region, and between the Arab world and sub-Saharan Africa, where the fact that numerous similar events took place in the same period is continually obscured.[2]

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[2] We are referring to remarks presented by Mojtaba Mahdavi and Hamid Dabashi at the Global Movement Assemblages Symposium, Brock University, 13-15 October 2016. A video of

However, even as these frameworks produce "otherness" in certain ways, in other ways they flatten global difference. Indeed, we contend that they struggle to deal productively with difference of any kind, whether gender, racial, colonial, or as some would argue, ontological (see Blaser, 2010). In posing these critiques, we are thinking of major traditions that define the field: Marxian and neo-Marxian approaches, world systems theory, the contentious politics tradition, "new social movement theory" as well as more recent theories of network society (Conway, 2017; Osterweil, 2014). This seeming inability to engage politically or theoretically with multiple kinds of difference is very consequential for scholars of social justice and social change as these movements are the most highly visible, globally dispersed and culturally diverse, and seemingly liberatory concatenations of resistance in the context of multiple crises of the present.

We recognize that "social movement" itself is a problematic concept and is modernist in its origins and underpinnings. We use it in an open and provisional way to name a wide range of collective action that is co-producing the world(s) we inhabit, and contesting human (and nonhuman) futures. Social movement is a category without moral status or political content before its concrete instantiation, and even then any social movement is internally heterogeneous and contradictory. In this special issue, we are assembling a particular set of contemporary social movements, all of them internally complex, differentiated and contested, which are carriers of ethical questions and projects which, however contradictorily, remain central to struggles over the future with which we are invested.

In exploring assemblage as an alternative onto-epistemic proposal with which to apprehend contemporary movements, we aim to be attentive to deep difference, and alert to risks of generalization and abstraction (especially at the global scale). We work to actively counter Eurocentrism in scholarship and politics, including in the discourses and practices of putatively progressive social movements. But at the same time, we continue to search for resonance and connection across social location and place-based difference, and thus the possibility of alliance and solidarity, the possibility of politics. In this, we are informed, on the one hand, by critical humanisms, including anticolonial, feminist, antiracist and Indigenous thought, and on the other, by the potential of complexity theories, particularly what we have come to call assemblage thinking. We recognize that there are significant tensions, arguably incommensurabilities, between these two intellectual poles and, indeed, this emerged as a fault line in the symposium. In the spirit of

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Mahdavi's presentation (including Dabashi's response) may be downloaded at http://hdl.handle.net/10464/13540 (or viewed on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-LKYTRH0lM&index=8&list=PLtxS-AsrC2JEmSWfzKwUduVPG7vAI7PuF&t=0s). Dabashi's presentation may be downloaded at http://hdl.handle.net/10464/13536 (or viewed on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lv0ZrBu8rXg&index=4&list=PLtxS-AsrC2JEmSWfzKwUduVPG7vAI7PuF&t=0s).

Puar's (2012, p. 51) discussion of the relationship between intersectionality and assemblage, we have worked to highlight the possibility of convivial conversation between traditions of thought that are not normally thought together.

That being said, while we believe assemblage thinking does help us confront endemic limitations of social movement studies, there also appear to be some intractable problems – or at least inherent tensions – in assemblage thinking as it is brought to bear on the politics of social movements and social change. The first involves the very limited (or non-existent) ways in which power and the political are addressed. While assemblage thinking valorizes the ephemeral, emergent, and molecular, and thus permanently keeps open space for new "possibles," critics see this avoidance of closure as an evasion of politics. On the other hand, what critics see as the absence of politics and thus of any strategic orientation for movement organizing, proponents theorize as a safeguard against the hegemony of a kind of top-down, molar politics that leaves no room for real difference, and thus no room for what has not yet been imagined as possible. In the latter view, assemblage thinking is a response and alternative to the known failures of more traditional and "robust" visions of the political.

A second and related problem lies in assemblage thinking's very unsatisfactory (or non-existent) treatment of social difference, the historical inequities that arise from intersecting structural oppressions, notably colonialism, racism and patriarchy, and the projects for alternative worlds arising from struggles against such oppression. In fact, the Indigenous, anti-racist and feminist scholars we invited were extremely skeptical about the utility of assemblage thinking. Some critiqued its erasure of Black and Indigenous histories and knowledges – of non-"Western" traditions generally. Others noted its seeming eschewal of history in favour of theory. Many problematized its abstract thinking about power – particularly of state violence – and were troubled by the fact that assemblage thinking seems to offer little in terms of substantive avenues or alternatives for concrete struggles for resistance and survival. Its very abstraction appears to be the source both of its theoretical force and its inherent problems.

In this fraught intersection of different political, theoretical and onto-epistemic traditions, in what follows, we outline different versions and deployments of assemblage thinking and explore its possibilities and limitations. In particular, we describe the work of Deleuze and Guattari, who are the preeminent source for much assemblage thinking, including for the authors appearing in this special issue. Because we cannot simply extract a single notion from their opus without distorting its meaning, we situate their notion of assemblage historically and within Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical universe. In particular, we seek to better understand the problems of power and difference that persistently arise from their work and from associated appropriations of assemblage thinking.

Beyond Deleuzian appropriations, we also introduce other ways that

assemblage thinking has been taken up, both as an ontology and as a mid-level concept, and consider its possible utility for both conceptualizing and making larger sense of the social eruptions of the post-2010s. Some scholars use the term merely as a useful concept while others seek to rebuild social theory and or advance a wholly new ontology (Acuto & Curtis, 2014a; Anderson & McFarlane, 2011). Numerous scholars combine assemblage thinking with other theoretical resources and ontological (and political) commitments, as with Puar's (2012) frictional relationship between assemblage and intersectionality. The concept of assemblage is being taken up by scholars across the natural and social sciences in a wide variety of ways, not all of which are commensurable**.** There is no single way to think about assemblages and we do not insist on a particular tradition.

"Assemblage" in Deleuze and Guattari

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) use the metaphor of the Orchid and the Wasp to explain how assemblages are collections of temporary relations between autonomous entities.[3] The Wasp enters the Orchid, becoming a piece of the Orchid's reproductive apparatus.   They conjoin and detach. When in contact, they constitute a set of possibilities – the Orchid becomes a tracing of the Wasp in order to connect with the Wasp as carrier of its pollen. Reproduction becomes possible. As they detach, new sets of possibilities arise. Their connection and detachment is not mimicry or imitation but rather "a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid, a becoming-orchid of the wasp" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 10).[4]

In this metaphoric visualization, the assemblage is the product of relations between autonomous parts. The relations between these parts are external to the parts themselves, insisting upon the autonomy of both the parts and the relations. Because they are constituted by connections between things, assemblages rely on a distinction between relations of interiority (those between components within the assemblage), and relations of exteriority (those with components external to the assemblage, and also with other assemblages). In this sense, assemblages are always finite. But they exist in a world composed entirely of assemblages, constantly composing and recomposing.

In thinking of movements as assemblages, relations of interiority can be seen in the internal dynamics and connections among the diverse elements that constitute what we think of as Occupy. For example, we can think of the assembly model of decision making, the built encampments, digital media platforms, and so on, as elements within the Occupy assemblage. Relations of

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[3] We have relied heavily on Thorburn (2015) for the following discussion of the Orchid-Wasp assemblage in Deleuze and Guattari.
[4] For a queer reading of the Orchid-Wasp assemblage focused on desire and problematizing the productivity of reproduction, see Roach (2012, p. 121).

exteriority can be seen in the interactions any localized Occupy has with its urban environment, the municipal government, the police force, health and safety by-laws, and so on. Relations of interiority and exteriority are constantly re-drawn, as various assemblages are activated through practices of relationality.

The connections between external and internal components create temporary wholes and permit new assemblages to emerge, highlighting the importance of relationality. Neither an assemblage nor any component part can be considered in isolation: individuals, institutions, devices, material objects, images, discourses, etc. When deploying assemblage thinking, all manner of materialized "things" are considered as in relation to each other and with regard to the immanent possibilities that their interminglings create. This emphasizes the living (though not necessarily organic), active nature of the assemblage; an assemblage's provisional unity is found in its convergence and co-functioning with other assemblages and heterogeneous components: a relationality between entities and affects (Deleuze & Parnet, 2007). Assemblage is a generative interaction, which can be neither reduced to its parts nor expanded to an infinite totality. In this way, assemblage thinking is also always and already ontological. That is to say, it offers a vision of reality as itself constituted by emergent entities none of which are fully sutured or complete, and all of which which are in a constant state of transformation.

In *A Thousand Plateaus,* the idea of relations of exteriority indicates that component parts of an assemblage can detach and plug into another assemblage where the interactions of this part will be different (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). This means that the component parts of an assemblage are conditioned, but not determined, by the relations they have (Deleuze & Parnet, 2007). For example, the use of the "people's mic" in the assemblage of Occupy was conditioned by the assemblage of the local state and its amplification bylaws in New York City. A particular assemblage emerged – the echoing human amplification of the people's mic – that spread from the particularity of the New York City Occupy encampment to many other encampments across North America and Europe, and attendant critiques emerged within encampments as to the utility of this embodied technology. In this way, the liaisons and relations established by multiplicities in an assemblage only create unity through co-functioning; they are only ever symbiotic, or "a sympathy" (Deleuze & Parnet, 2007, p. 69). As an assemblage lacks an inherent organization, it can draw into its body disparate elements; it can contain other assemblages and create other assemblages by entering into relations with other entities.

As assemblages are created through the relations between parts, they instantiate a constituent power. This constituent power emerges from the capacity of things within an assemblage to "exceed their relations" (Ruddick, 2012, p. 208) and to establish something new, as one constituent element disappears and is replaced by new properties of the assemblage. This is not mimicry or analogy but, rather, the generation of a new way of being. These

are "becomings" and they hold a political potential. Grounded in a vitalist materialism, this endless capacity for newness cannot be contained, predicted or directed. This quality of assemblage is the source of its attraction as an anti-authoritarian theory of the political in which power is omnipresent and generative, but always dispersed and dispersing. Through its very nature, it is considered resistant to centralization and totalization.

Moreover, according to Deleuze and Guattari, all becomings are "minoritarian," meaning that they inherently resist incorporation into dominant norms (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 106). To the extent that there is a theory of power in relation to difference in assemblage thinking, it is here – as difference is manifested in endless becomings, the incessant appearance of newness. As such, becoming is an omnipresent challenge to "molar" or totalizing power, exemplified in the power of the modern state. Furthermore, Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 277) claim, "[a]lthough all becomings are already molecular, including becoming-woman, it must be said that all becomings begin with and pass through becoming-woman. It is the key to all other becomings." Although potentially resonant with anti-colonial, Indigenous, anti-racist and feminist theory and politics, there is also a fundamental disconnect here. Although Deleuze and Guattari posit a philosophical or analytical assertion of being with women and other subjugated peoples, they ultimately fail to move beyond an abstracted privileging of minoritarian subjects. As Rosi Braidotti writes in response to Deleuze and Guattari's statement above:

> Whereas Deleuze situates his project of becoming within philosophy – albeit against the grain of the dominant canon – feminists think about their becoming outside the beaten tracks of academic life, as a project that reunites life and thought into a far-reaching project of transformation. Feminism is a philosophy of change and of becoming: it functions through creative mimesis, that is to say by activating counter-memories. (Braidotti, 1996, p. 312)

The incessant flux of assemblage thinking, and of Deleuzian thought more generally, has the effect of reducing all historical struggles to abstract becomings. This move to abstraction empties them of their historical specificities, evacuates their meaning and their political force. Because it is also a universalizing move, it *undermines* any possibility of alliance because it effaces difference in its specificity and therefore any capacity to negotiate it. Furthermore, in flattening difference, it effectively equalizes all minoritarian subject positions and so fails to provide any critical resources to read struggles in relation to each other, or to any political ethic beyond that of dispersion of power.

We will return to the problems of power in relation to difference and in relation to the political identified above. At this point though, in recognizing the overriding influence of Deleuze and Guattari in the articles collected here, we want to both situate their work more fully while also acknowledging other genealogies and deployments of assemblage thinking.

Other Genealogies of "Assemblage Thinking"

A Thousand Plateaus, in which the concept of assemblage appears most prominently, is largely a product of its time and place. Written in Europe in the aftermath of the revolutionary struggles of 1968, *A Thousand Plateaus* offered a sombre appraisal of those events. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 238) write, "those who evaluated things in macropolitical terms" at the time "understood nothing of the event because something unaccountable was happening." That unaccountable something was a "micropolitics" that left politicians, parties, unions, and many leftists "ultimately vexed" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 238). Micropolitics concerns transformations in sensibility and modes of relating; macropolitics concerns conscious positions, demands and open struggles (Nunes & Trott, 2008). As such, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the events of 1968 are significant not on the basis of demands met, goals attained, or victories achieved (macropolitics), but rather for the conceptual shifts, relational modes, and affective or psychic transformations inaugurated (micropolitics). These micropolitics can inform and infect a macropolitics.

   Activists and scholars alike tend to translate macro (or molar) versus micro (or molecular) as referring to a neat distinction between, on the one hand, modern institutionalizations of power, preeminently the state (the macro), and, on the other, the more quotidian, cultural, and "micro" or small. However, as Deleuze and Guattari themselves put it, "everything is political and every politics is simultaneously both" (1987, p. 213). Said differently, macro and micro are simultaneously present in any instance of politics. The macro and the micro of politics are not scalar concepts; they do not refer to the size or site of struggle. Rather they are about different aspects or registers of the political. In 1968, Deleuze and Guattari write, a "molecular flow was escaping, minuscule at first, then swelling" (1987, p. 238). It was an unfolding of forces which marked changes in political relations, structures of thinking, and compositions of struggle that were both concrete and ephemeral, pragmatic and affective. It is these political legacies permeating *A Thousand Plateaus* that inform the concept of the assemblage (see Thorburn, 2015). The concept of assemblage represents a reaching for the conceptual shifts, relational modes, and affective transformations inaugurated in the micropolitical upheavals of 1968.

   Regular miscontrual of these terms (macro/micro; molar/molecular), as well as substantive disagreements about the relative political import attributed to each register (macropolitical/micropolitical), and the putative relation of each to the other, are the source of vexing problems in any political application of assemblage thinking, and of the work of Deleuze and Guattari more broadly. The constellation of protests of the 2010s is similarly vexing. In this context, Deleuzian theory of assemblage invites us to consider the register of the micropolitical in these movements, its operations, its potentialities and its limitations. A failure to perceive the micropolitical and

its significance has led, on the one hand, to an uncritical celebration of these rebellions, and, on the other, to their dismissal as dismal failures – often in the same breath by the same commentator. Power operating in assemblages is, in a Foucauldian vein, omnipresent, amoral and productive. Assemblage thinking can thus produce more complex, post-human(ist) accounts of power in movement, that, in its attention to the micropolitical, can be more generative in creative, agentic responses, and permanently open-ended in their political horizons.

There also exist tensions and contradictions in how Deleuze and Guattari, and assemblage thinking more generally, have been taken up: put simply, a division exists between the more Marxist/Autonomist influenced reading (best identified in the work of Hardt and Negri (2000) and other post-Operaismo theorists), and alternatively a body of work based more on complexity theory in biology, neuroscience, ecology, and other fields (see Escobar, 2018; DeLanda, 2006; Protevi, 2013.)

In non-Deleuzian social theory, the concept of assemblage in particular is picked up and developed as an ontology by Manuel DeLanda, especially in his text *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (2006). Assemblage theory or thinking can also be found in fields such as Science and Technology Studies (STS) and feminist STS in particular, complexity and systems theories, feminist and political ecology. It has also informed an emerging body of work on autonomy and social movements, largely from Latin America , where it is in conversation with a wider diversity of sources including Latin American Indigenous and decolonial thought. Some recent works engage a range of Indigenous sources with and through the lens of STS, complexity theory as well as other non-dualist concepts, what they term theories of relationality. In so doing, they consider the possibility that assemblage thinking – or something very homologous – could be found in Indigenous worldviews, as well as the political visions of some place-based and autonomist movements (see Escobar, 2018; Ingold, 2011).

In a recent conversation with Janet Conway and Michal Osterweil, Arturo Escobar offered a self-described "idiosyncratic" genealogy of assemblage thinking, in which he situates "assemblage" as belonging to a family of concepts that can be considered "post-poststructural" (post-constructivist), post-dualist, and neo-realist – what he terms most broadly as relational (which he in turn sees as ontological). These distinct theoretical developments share a critique of foundationalism, essentialism and universalism. Moreover, they seek to address the pitfalls or shortcoming of poststructuralism as having "deconstructed too much," leaving us with no capacity to envision any politics beyond deconstruction itself, and thus no basis for any substantive alternative horizon. Assemblage theories seek to address the realm of the non-human – everything ranging from objects or things – organic and inorganic, to spirituality, affect, emotion, etc. In short, they recognize the force of multiple materialities that social theory in general

– including poststructuralism, liberalism and Marxism – had rendered non-existent (A. Escobar, personal communication, February, 2017).

For us, then, a necessary place to start in our consideration of assemblage thinking is to recognize that theory is always situated, and always has a relationship to particular bodies, times and places. We therefore advocate locating the concept of assemblage, and diverse deployments of it, in their own historical and political contexts, including as a way of revealing its politics. Doing so not only provincializes a theory widely perceived as placeless and universal; it can also mobilize those politics to more directly engage the problems of power, difference and the political attributed to assemblage thinking.

We, as members of this authorial collective, inhabit different parts of this spectrum of assemblage thinking: one more in line with the Autonomist reading of Deleuze and Guattari; another more convinced by DeLanda and the complexity-influenced genealogy; another more swayed by the feminist, antiracist and Indigenous critiques of assemblage. Rather than resolve these differences or render an ultimate judgment of assemblage theory, we think it more useful to recognize that much ambivalence surrounding assemblage thinking stems from a failure to acknowledge the diverse sources of thought and, behind these, quite different problems – methodological, political, epistemological and ontological – that have provoked their emergence.

"Assemblage" as a Mid-level Concept: What does the Term "Assemblage" Enable us to Think and Do?

We conclude our theoretical exploration by considering the merits of a mid-level appropriation of assemblage thinking; that is, as a concept, an analytic, or as an approach to empirical study. The utility of a mid-level appropriation of assemblage thinking has been explored and debated in geography, anthropology, and international relations, and within these domains, there are several works considering its application to social movements.[5] However, we are aware that these aspects of inquiry cannot be thought of as separable from the ontological considerations explored above, insofar as our understandings of the "real" impinge on what and how we approach its study. Politically "realist" narratives of Occupy, for example, demand that the movement produces demands; that it organize itself in ways that it can be represented

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[5] In Geography, see special issues in *Area, 43*(2) and *City, 15*(2, 3, 5, 6). In Anthropology, see Ong & Collier (2005). For International Relations, see Acuto & Curtis (2014a). For assemblage thinking in these disciplines as relevant to the study of social movements, see, e.g., McFarlane (2009); Escobar (2008); and Deuchars (2010), respectively. Note though that assemblage thinking is by its very nature (sic!) a transdisciplinary undertaking. These sources exemplify the range of ways assemblage thinking is being taken up. It is worth noting that a scholar like Sassen (2006) uses assemblage as a simple concept in a very fruitful way without feeling any need to weigh in on or even engage the larger theoretical debates about assemblage thinking.

intelligibly to governments, the media, the public. In the process, this "real" effaces the way different worlds were coming into being in that assemblage. This is not to make a judgment about these other worlds, their possibility or desirability, but rather to suggest that opening spaces and strengthening capacities to *see* the in-breaking of other emergent/actual/possible worlds is a critical epistemological and political task in the present moment. The ontological turn represented by relational thinking, of which assemblage thinking is one variant, reflects this sensibility.[6]

As an approach, assemblage thinking invites consideration of the arbitrariness of social scientific practices of bounding phenomena for study. It is not that we can do without (provisionally) bounding things, but assemblage thinking provokes us to consider how phenomena might be analytically bound in multiple ways, with diverse temporalities, spatialities, and mash-ups of human and non-human matter; how different assemblages interpolate, converge and dissipate from different angles of vision. For neo-realists who embrace assemblage as ontology, this describes processes of being and becoming that exist regardless of any particular way of seeing them. For DeLanda, the study of the social is the study of actually-existing (although always emergent) assemblages (Escobar, 2008, p. 287.) Whether one agrees with DeLanda or not, what cannot be negated is how conceptions of what counts as "real" have a way of affecting both our political and analytical interventions. In the case of movements, activists and analysts alike are often dealing with efforts at producing new realities, with little awareness of what conception of the real they start out with. As Latour writes, "If sociology of the social" – his term for our current frameworks of empirical study – "works fine with what has already been assembled, it does not work so well to collect anew the participants in what is not – not yet – a sort of social realm" (Latour, 2005. p. 12). This is a core problem for both researchers and practitioners of movement.

As a method or an empirical approach, a problem or phenomenon is proposed by the researcher and studied as an assemblage. The boundaries of any assemblage are those established by the researcher. It is not necessary to embrace assemblage as an ontology or as a wholesale remaking of social theory in order to use assemblage thinking to make more complex our thinking about social processes and possibilities (i.e., to engage in assemblage analytics). As noted above, assemblage thinking has some obvious similarities to post-structuralism (see Escobar, 2008, pp. 120-128). It is an anti-totalizing and deconstructionist form of thought. Its distinctiveness from post-structuralism resides in its (neo)realist ontology and its stress on the agency of all manner of matter: human, non-human, and other. However, discourses can themselves be studied as assemblages or as elements of

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[6] We note further that Indigenous and other forms of non-Eurocentric thought demonstrated awareness of ontological difference before the ontological turn in Western social theory (see Blaser, 2010). The Western modern/postmodern genealogies of assemblage thinking surveyed above grant it a wider reception than pre-existing but more marginal forms of thought.

assemblages.

In using assemblage as a way to conceptualize social movements, it is akin to the idea of network or coalition, but with two important differences. First, assemblage thinking invites consideration of the agency of non-human elements, such as those in/of the built environment, landscapes, ecologies, animal or earth beings, technologies, machines, etc. It is a non-anthropomorphic or post-humanist way of understanding and studying the social. Second, assemblage thinking pushes beyond modernist modes of social thought that rely on taken-for-granted unities, for example, of organization, polity, state, economy, culture, and social movement as fixed and discrete entities. Assemblage thinking invites reconsideration of such seemingly stable entities as more fluid and contingent concatenations of people and things whose seeming permanency is produced through repetition of behaviors in a constant process of assembling and reassembling, but which is also, therefore, subject to disruption and dispersion. Assemblage thinking thus provokes us to think differently about agency, power and possibility. It can help us reconceive agency, as produced in and through the assemblage, through the relationality of its elements. Agency is a relational effect, not an attribute either of individual humans or movements as collective subjects.

Assemblage thinking seeks to replace reifications with "concrete histories of the processes by which entities are formed and made to endure" (Acuto & Curtis, 2014b, p. 7). It stresses emergence, multiplicity and indeterminacy, and is open with regard to the form and durability of the unity, the types of relations and human and non-human elements involved (Anderson & McFarlane, 2011, p. 124). Again this works against some of the latent positivism, macro-structuralism and Cartesian habitus in much of the social scientific literature on social movements (Osterweil, 2010, pp. 6-7).

In exploring assemblage thinking *vis-à-vis* the spatiality of social movements, McFarlane suggests that its utility lies in perceiving three inter-related sets of processes: (1) the gathering, coherence and dispersion of (2) groups or collectives of elements and their distributed agency as (3) emergent formations. He uses the concept of translocal assemblage to describe composites of place-based social movements in relations of exchange and involved in "co-eval becoming" (McFarlane, 2009, pp. 562, 564): "assemblage places emphasis on agency, on the bringing together or forging alignments (Li, 2007) between the social and material, and between different sites," but which exceed the connections between sites (McFarlane, 2009, p. 563). This last point differentiates assemblage from network, in that the former emphasizes history, labour, materiality and performance in processes of assembling – not merely connections between sites (McFarlane, 2009, p. 567). For McFarlane, assemblage offers the possibility of moving away from spatial master concepts such as scale or network, or better, allowing for multiplicity of spatial imaginaries and practices as operating within an assemblage. He uses the descriptor "translocal" to mitigate against the

assumptions of hierarchy and power built into global-local or larger-smaller designations.

The notion of assemblage can be used to help think about the emergence, unfolding, and dissolution of the Occupy movement, for example, as a diverse set of localized practices, each with its distinctiveness, but all recognizably in relation to each other in a translocal assemblage and taking shape, together and apart, in and against a larger field of forces. Assemblage thinking can help us appreciate the self-organized, emergent and contingent character of any place-based Occupy as a singularity, the diversity of human and non-human agencies that composed it, as well as its constitutive relation with Occupy as a transnational networked phenomenon and as a virtual reality digitally constituted across the global spaces of the internet.

Assemblage thinking could also assist in situating any particular Occupy, or the transnational Occupy ensemble, in relation to North American urban spaces, unemployed white youth, homeless people, policing, municipal public health bylaws, private/public land, housing foreclosures, sexual violence, hand-lettered signs, mass media representations, activist contestations, digital and social media, discourses of direct democracy, American histories of the public meeting, histories of white settlement and occupation, the global financial crisis, etc. These note different trajectories that engage with different intensities and which themselves exceed the Occupy assemblage, but are, for the period of engagement, also "components" in the Occupy assemblage or in one or more larger assemblages which conditioned the emergence and possibilities of Occupy. Assemblage thinking provokes the researcher to ask: what is the "thing" "Occupy"? How did it materialize? What is its topology (the way its parts are organized and connected; i.e., its interiority) and what are the larger topologies in which it is situated, which condition (not determine) its possibilities (i.e., its exteriority)? Moreover, such a distributed topology might help disinvest us from our bounded/delimited understandings of movement outcomes and successes.

Russell, Pusey and Chatterton (2011, p. 580) make the important point that "assemblages are not political in and of themselves; it is what puts them in movement, what composes them or decomposes them that is the object of the political." This is particularly so when we are talking about movement assemblages. There is always a conceptual politics behind choices in assemblage thinking, informed by practical political and normative questions (Acuto & Curtis, 2014b, p. 12) There is no inherent normativity; this is injected by the theorist's choice of what to assemble for what purposes. Which are the relevant elements: bodies, technologies, politics, affects? (Thorburn, 2015).

Contributions to the Special Issue

This special issue seeks to open new paths for inquiry about contemporary social movements. This is in response to the extraordinary events and aftermaths of the post-2010 uprisings and their evident resonance across contexts, on the one hand, and on the other, the inadequacy of most social science to make sense of them. In exploring the potential of assemblage thinking, we are not searching for a new grand theory, but to see relationships anew, to assemble new aspects, and therefore, perhaps, to discover new potentialities, political and otherwise, arising from them. Our interest is in inquiring into the possible meaning of these events and their agency at scales beyond their immediate contexts and beyond the sum of individual episodes, without losing sight of the contextual specificity and the internal heterogeneity of each, and examining their convergences and divergences, inclusions and exclusions. Furthermore, while movement struggles are ineluctably conducted in place-based ways, they are powerfully constituted, enabled and constrained by relations and forces beyond the immediate and the proximate.

In addition to this introduction, the special issue consists of three peer-reviewed papers, a music video montage, two video compilations, and the transcript of a panel exchange.

We begin with "Global Movement Assemblages: A Post-2011 Social Movements Montage", a nine-minute music video that provides an engaging visual and aural survey of the post-2010 movements, highlighting the protagonism of women, and beginning and ending with Indigenous resistance on Turtle Island. In between, creator Kushan Azadah takes us from Tahrir Square in Cairo, to Black Lives Matter in North America, to Occupy Wall Street, the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, to Puerta del Sol in Madrid, to the Umbrella movement in Hong Kong.[7]

A second video compilation, "Assemblage Thinking and Transnational/Translocal Social Movements of the 2010s," presents keynote addresses by feminist social movement scholars, Janet Conway and Sonia Alvarez.[8] Conway introduces assemblage thinking as an alternative approach to making sense of the post-2010 global movement ensemble. Using the example of Occupy Wall Street, she proposes combining assemblage thinking with decolonial critique to re-read Occupy through its Indigenous interlocutors as occupying Indigenous land. Alvarez considers the utility of assemblage to think about activism, protest, and participation in contemporary forms of transnational and translocal feminism. She proposes the concept "discursive fields of action" as an alternative to "social movement" in light of Afro-Brazilian feminism and the Brazilian Slutwalk.

[7] Download video montage at http://hdl.handle.net/10464/13526 (or view it on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slanINelNxM).
[8] Download video compilation at http://hdl.handle.net/10464/13528 (or view it on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UKptIiVVGA).

This video compilation concludes with a series of short interventions by Alvarez, Rinaldo Walcott, Öznur Karakaş , Lee Cormie and Glen Coulthard assessing the utility of assemblage thinking.

The peer-reviewed papers in this special issue consider assemblage with other Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts in interrogating and unfolding some of the deepest held assumptions about political contestations in recent years. We bring together theorists working on the Palestinian resistance, the Gezi movement in Turkey, and the Montreal edition of the World Social Forum.

Mark Ayyash, in his paper "An Assemblage of Decoloniality? Palestinian Fellahin Resistance and the Space-Place Relation" seeks to understand how fellahin resistance has interacted with the settler-colonial project of Zionism. Employing Deleuze and Guattari's theory of assemblage and their conception of space as smooth and striated, Ayyash's work demonstrates ways in which assemblage thinking can be brought to bear on anticolonial resistance deeply rooted in territory and history to illuminate decolonial alternatives. Assemblage assists theoretically in recognizing the autonomy of land from ethno-national projects – a disposition long enacted by the fellahin. Ayyash also helps us see temporal and spatial dimensions of assemblage thinking beyond the immediate and the proximate. Most importantly, Ayyash's work combines thinking on assemblages with other forms of theorizing that centre decolonial modes of thought and politics. In operationalizing insights generated from assemblage thinking, critical analytics of colonial occupation and dispossession, and the everyday theorizing emerging in resistance, his paper works to generate a different perspective through which we can examine the decoloniality of resistance.

In "Gezi Assemblages: Embodied Encounters in the Making of an Alternative Space," Öznur Karakaş reflects on the events in Gezi park during the summer of 2011. She aims to get at the political significance of the "lived multiplicity" of "bodies marked by difference" in the creation of alternative space, new relationality, and dissident community, and argues for the importance of analytically understanding the emergent diverse communities that occupied Gezi park as assemblages. She focuses on the embodied and affective aspects of the events in Istanbul, arguing that the concept of assemblage allows for an attention beyond the political understood as instrumental effect, to the impacts on and by bodies and affects to become other than they are. For Karakaş, the material, embodied and affective aspect of the activism in Occupy movements, in which she includes Gezi, are crucial and correspond to the homology between body and assemblage in Deleuze and Guattari.

In "Acknowledging Strength in Plurality: the World Social Forum 2016 through the Prism of Assemblage Thinking," Carminda Mac Lorin and Nikolas Schall approach the World Social Forum (WSF) as an assemblage, as a way to overcome the impasse in conceptualizing and theorizing the Forum as either an open space characterized by heterogeneity or as a coherent and unified political actor. They employ assemblage as an analytical tool to better

apprehend the Forum as a constantly mutating phenomenon, and to conceptualize the relation of its heterogenous parts to the Forum as a provisional whole. Grounded in participant-observation at the 2016 edition in Montreal, they pay particular attention to the global and local Indigenous assemblage(s) at the Forum, and how these intersected with organizers' intentionalities: how Mohawk claims to the territory co-existed with the corporate urbanity of downtown Montreal and with organizers' attempts to resignify urban space; and how government policies governing visas created absences in the WSF, which organizers sought to make visible, and thus present. They demonstrate that conceiving the WSF as an assemblage permits a more complex reading of the diverse range of materialities at work in its composition at any particular point in time and space. This allows a complex re-appraisal of the WSF and its potentialities, in particular, a way of holding the plurality of the WSF in a dynamic unity that transcends the terms of the space-actor polemic that has heretofore dominated the debate.

Also included in the special issue are a textual and audio-visual record of an exchange between Black Studies scholar, Rinaldo Walcott, and *Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg* scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson speaking about Black Lives Matter and Idle No More respectively, with Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard responding to them both. In the textual piece, entitled "Idle No More and Black Lives Matter: An Exchange," Walcott and Simpson each situate these movements within longer histories of struggle for freedom and being, and address translocal connectivities, but notably without using the language of assemblage. Each for their own reasons rejects assemblage thinking in favour of forms of critical thought arising from histories of resistance with which they are identified: the radical Black tradition, *Nissnaabeg* intelligence, and Indigenous resurgence more generally. Simpson offers a compelling alternative to assemblage in the image of "constellations of co-resistance." The video piece, called "Situating Indigenous and Black Resistance in the Global Movement Assemblage," includes Coulthard's keynote address at the Global Movement Assemblages symposium along with the panel exchange with Walcott and Simpson. Coulthard presents the idea of a global assemblage of anti-imperialist radicalism, connecting Indigenous resistance and resurgence to the radical Black tradition. He recounts the 20th century history of political alliance-building between Dene leaders and African anti-colonial movements, informed by "grounded normativity": ethics based on a relational ontology of deep reciprocity between people and place, and including non-human life forms.[9]

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[9] Download video compilation at http://hdl.handle.net/10464/13529
(or view it on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfuBOA_Yqzg).

Acknowledgments

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