Mapping children’s politics: the promise of articulation and the limits of nonrepresentational theory

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Received 22 April 2011; in revised form 31 July 2011

Abstract. Reflecting wider debates in the discipline, recent scholarship in children’s geographies has focused attention on the meanings of the political. While supportive of work that opens up new avenues for conceptualizing politics beyond the liberal rational subject, we provide a critique of research methods which delink politics from historical context and relations of power. Focusing on the use of nonrepresentational theory as a research methodology, the paper points to the limits of this approach for children’s political formation as well as for sustained scholarly collaboration. We argue instead for a politics of articulation, in the double sense of communication and connection. An empirical case study is used as an illustrative example.

Keywords: nonrepresentational theory, children’s politics, collaborative mapping, articulation, research methods

Introduction
Over the past decade there has been increasing interest in the boundaries of the political. What constitutes a political act? What does it mean to be political? What does political scholarship look like? While vigorous debate on these questions in geography is far from over (see, eg, Amin and Thrift, 2005; 2007; Harvey, 2006; Smith, 2005), the conceptual framing of what constitutes the political has broadened in recent years.

For those doing research with children this broader theoretical scope is welcome and, indeed, many children’s geographers have been instrumental in redefining the boundaries and meanings of the political. Eschewing normative categories, or ‘capital P’ politics, many scholars now perceive children’s behavior as political in manifold ways rather than viewing it only through the signifying codes of adult categories (Horschelmann, 2008; Kallio, 2008; Kallio and Hakli, 2011; Skelton, 2010). In addition to a shift from more conventional understandings of rational debate and civic engagement to a greater emphasis on practice and performance many scholars have also proclaimed the competence of children as effective social actors and capable political beings (eg, Leonard, 2006; Matthews and Limb, 1999).

Much of this contemporary research manifests a strong, positive effort to reclaim space for children and to legitimate and document the actions of a group often marginalized in mainstream analysis (Holt, 2004). In celebrating the heterogeneous and performative such research also reflects a movement away from modernist ideas of communicative rationality and an often exclusionary lineage of formal politics. Mirroring wider theoretical trends, much of the newer research on children’s political geographies embraces poststructuralist ideas about the importance of the liminal, the dialogic, and the quotidian, as introduced by scholars as diverse as de Certeau, Latour, and Bakhtin (see, eg, Dyson, 2008; Kallio, 2008; Skelton and Valentine, 2003).

While the entry of new theories about what constitutes the political, and who can be recognized as political actors, has been refreshing and important, there are also some concerns we wish to raise. The widely heralded social and political competence of children,
for example, has sometimes occluded analyses of desirable, insurmountable, or necessary limits to children’s political agency. In other words, in the rush to anoint children as worthy citizens and equal political beings there has been some slippage around the thorny issue of their equal social and political rights. In this vein Vanderbeck (2008) discusses some of the disadvantages of a pervasive, consensus-based mode of seemingly pro-child thinking on this topic. The issue of competence and legal rights is actually quite complicated, he argues, especially vis-à-vis adult constraints of children’s agency in areas such as voting, drinking, compulsory education, and sexual consent.

Some adult-imposed limits may in fact be beneficial to the health and happiness of children, at least partially because of wider structural issues and problems in society that render children especially vulnerable in certain circumstances. An overweening focus on children’s agency or affect can make this broader view hard to see or value. Aitken (2007, page 119) observes, for example, that an unreflective celebration of children’s actions and competence can work “to the detriment of an analysis of wider social and spatial contexts”. Similarly, the emphasis on transient, embodied practices can work to individualize and depoliticize processes and relations of power.

In this paper we investigate the theoretical tensions between an investigative focus on present-moment, personal practices and performances, and ongoing sociostructural patterns and constraints. We argue that, in many recent examples in the literature on children, an overemphasis on the ephemeral, noncognitive world of affect and performance comes at the expense of a more holistic analysis of the longer term forces which help to produce and condition these practices and feelings. Our critique is narrowly focused on a specific thread of work in nonrepresentational theory (NRT), a subset of ideas that has become influential in some children’s geographies. This is not to suggest that all scholarship investigating children’s politics or social worlds is influenced by these ideas. Indeed, much of the ongoing work on children continues to emphasize the structural forces and material practices which affect subjectivity and agency (see, eg, Aitken and Plows, 2010; Bosco et al, 2011; Hopkins, 2009; Thomas, 2009). Similarly, significant work linking the vagaries of an ever-shifting capitalist economy with the experiences of childhood and opportunities of young people worldwide continues to remain front and central, particularly in US-based scholarship (eg, Katz, 2004; 2008).

The concern we wish to foreground in this paper is limited to a small yet influential corpus of scholarship that is not specific to children’s geographies but which, nevertheless, has had an important impact on the subfield. We acknowledge the validity of NRT as a philosophical intervention but deplore its increasing use as method in empirical research. In the work of many (but not all) proponents of NRT we see not an opening of the entrenched battle lines of what constitutes the political but rather, through the elision of geographical methods which elicit social interrelations and historical patterns, an inversion of politics—the extension of a mode of thought that we believe to be profoundly depoliticizing.

There are many lively and ongoing debates in children’s geographies concerning subjectivity, situationality, embodiment, and other terms that we reference in this paper. Struggles over what constitutes the political, the importance of material practices, and the role of history are evident in many journals and in the discussions and conclusions of several papers. Moreover, perhaps more than in any other area of geography, scholars working with children are aware of the complicated power relations involved in their research projects, even when, or perhaps especially when, the research is participatory, ‘fun’, and/or related to children’s school or after-school activities (see, eg, Cahill, 2007; Gallagher, 2008; Skelton, 2008). Thus, we want to be clear that our critique is not directed at all those working on
children’s geographies. Rather, we wish to use our own research experiences with children to draw attention to a much wider set of debates in geography as a whole. In what follows we introduce some of the main tenets of NRT and some ongoing debates on the politics of representation in fieldwork and scholarship. We then engage these themes more directly by introducing a case study involving several months of fieldwork with 11–13 year olds in a middle school in Seattle. In our analysis we discuss our conceptualization of the political, drawing primarily on the idea of *articulation*. We also highlight the adult–child interactions that were made possible through shared representational practices such as computer-based neighborhood mapping and written and spoken comments and dialogue.

We believe there to be a politics to these interactions in the form of an emerging political awareness, a sense of larger connections, and identity formation among some of the children as they come to better understand and articulate (in the sense of forging connections with and also graphically and verbally communicating) the spatial arc of their everyday relationships, paths, and journeys through the school and surrounding neighborhoods. This is a politics based on alliances and a shared use of symbols that takes place outside of conventional understandings of political behavior and/or engagement with civic institutions per se.

In this paper we attempt to chart a course between modernist narratives of ‘Politics, which emphasize forms of civic life and ‘rational’ behavior that are largely inaccessible to underprivileged children such as those in our study, and conceptualizations of affect and performance that locate individual politics and agency everywhere, and negate or underplay the socioeconomic conditions of power in which these politics play out. Ironically, in the former narrative nothing that children do can be considered political, whereas in the latter everything may be political but the material conditions of life are radically depoliticized.

Moreover, we argue that there is an ethical component involved in the politics of research itself, involving the social dissemination of knowledge. This is a position on scholarly responsibility quite removed from the ‘ethics of enactment’ advocated by NRT followers such as McCormack (2005, page 142; see also 2003). Those who adhere strictly to NRT as a research methodology are concerned not with the findings or representations that are created through the research process but, rather, only with the moment or interactions of the process itself. Dirksmeier and Helbrecht (2008, page 11) write, for example, “in the frequent case of interviewing, non-representational theory is not interested in the representations which are produced, ie, the transcript, but rather in the interaction process of interviewing itself. It postulates thereby a break with the dictation of the production of representations.” This position emphasizes ‘the event’ or the “soliciting of the event” (Dewsbury, 2003, page 1926) and clearly precludes any ‘re’-representation, otherwise known as socially produced knowledge, other than observation at an individual scale or a temporal moment. While it might change an individual’s style and thereby enhance his or her “affective capacities” (Popke, 2008, page 2), it forecloses the possibilities for substantive inquiry or scholarly collaboration that is sustained through time and space. We argue that a key responsibility of empirical research with people is exactly this form of sustained scholarly collaboration through clearly articulated research methodology and shared findings, a position we find to be largely at odds with the temporal and individualistic nature of most NRT.

Nonrepresentational theory
In geography NRT has been vaunted by its practitioners as a critical methodology in the *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Geography* (Dewsbury, 2009), highlighted as a “necessary response to a contemporary political moment” in *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (Anderson, 2009, page 504), and the subject of a series of reports in *Progress in Human Geography* (Lorimer, 2005; 2007; 2008). The core ideas of NRT include a celebration of
noncognitive or precognitive practices, and a focus on flow, encounter, and assemblage over bodies of thought which are reputedly more linear, categorical, intentional, and conventional. The leitmotif of NRT is movement, the flow of practices through time. It is antisubstantialist in orientation, relying on emotive qualities such as those of ‘push’ or “vitalist intuition” (Thrift, 2008, page 5). Practitioners insist on taking the body seriously and on focusing on affect-based understandings and performative research, engaging in “practice-based thinking, embodiment, present-moment focus, and distributed agency” (Dewsbury, 2009, page 322).

In geography NRT gains ground with Thrift’s discussion of the tyranny of words and the ways in which those who love words (notably academics) project their own verbal codes and ontologies onto others (notably nonacademics). In this view the (over)use of words, as the primary representational form of intellectuals, underplays the emotions and expressions of those who rely more on nonrational or nonconceptual practices in their lives (Thrift, 2000). By extension, maps can also be seen as problematic as they function as intentional symbols used by semiotic experts and knowledge makers at the expense of unreflective embodied actions and actors.

The idea of NRT became valued initially as a kind of philosophical caveat to the social sciences, a playful reminder about the importance of the unexpected, the excessive, and the inexpressible, the dangers of scientism, and the hubris of desiring explanations for things that cannot always be explained. It functioned early on as a celebration of new ways of thinking about performance and the flowing nature of body practices. These were valuable additions to the larger body of poststructuralist thought being developed at the time. Despite the initial presumption of transitory intervention, however, NRT was subsequently taken up and legitimated as critically useful on a grander and more permanent basis by a number of social scientists.

Dirksmeier and Helbrecht (2008, page 1), for example, have argued that NRT can serve as an important new methodology for qualitative social research as it does not “fall back to a position of causality as the temporal consequence of a cause and effect.” Their positive consideration of it stems from the perceived limits of its precursor, the ‘performative turn’, which in their view remains mired in problems of causality—of connecting present performances to past events (rather than understanding performance as something that takes place just once). For these scholars NRT is a useful methodology of practice because it solves the ‘genetic fallacy’ problem of causality by seeing the entire research process as a performance, one that is significant only in the moment, without any necessary connection to events of the past or its possible historical genesis.

In divorcing NRT from performativity Dirksmeier and Helbrecht remove it from the taint of politics as well as from the problem of time. Butler’s (1990; 1993) early formulations of performativity, for example, were deeply political, at least partially because they located behavior or performance in a wider set of subjectifying forces. While Butler loosened the fixed relationships between body and identity, she never disassociated personal embodied gender practices from ongoing social relations of dominance and subordination. She argued that it is precisely the ritualized nature of unconscious repetition that sediments certain forms of gender practices and makes them appear natural. As Nash (2000, page 655) puts it, “Gender does not exist outside of its ‘doing’, but its performance is also a reiteration of previous ‘doings’ that become naturalized as gender norms.” Personal agency is thus conceptualized as always constrained within a larger field of social forces and power relations, even when (or perhaps especially when) that agency is unconscious, manifested in mundane bodily

(1) See Nelson (1999), however, for a critique of the ways in which performativity theory assumes an abstracted subject and was sometimes adopted in geography without sufficient attention to the materialities of concrete subjects.
practices. Through its emphasis on the present moment, however, NRT evacuates these larger sociohistorical processes of their political force and meaning.

**Who speaks for the jaguar?**

In addition to eschewing the representation of historical time, NRT proponents also distance themselves from the politically and academically complex terrain of representing ‘the Other’, particularly Others who are marginalized in society. Thrift (2008, page 3) writes, for example, “There are too many theories, all of them seemingly speaking on behalf of those whose lives have been damaged by the official structures of power.” While this position is undoubtedly safer than engaging in what is clearly a thorny issue, it is problematic for a number of reasons, many of which were tackled theoretically over two decades ago by both Haraway (1992) and Spivak (1988).

In “The promises of monsters”, for example, Haraway (1992) examined the inappropriateness of speaking for vulnerable or inarticulate others through distancing them from their surroundings. For the ‘jaguar’ and the ‘fetus’, which are her referents in the article, this involves the removal of the people of the forest and the pregnant woman, who are projected as too close to the represented object and therefore constituted as having interests that are opposed to or antagonistic towards it. She notes how this removal and abstraction disempowers the other actors located in the broader domain in which the actor or thing is located, as well as the represented entity itself, which becomes the recipient of action rather than a coconstitutor. The process also has the effect of setting up the one who isolates and then represents the jaguar or fetus as a scientific ‘expert’.

Haraway eschews this form of ‘R’epresentation, which rests on the triumvirate of possession, objectivity, and expertise. Yet her challenge to representation as usual does not lead to an unwillingness to represent at all, or to an unwillingness to take responsibility for ‘real-world’ problems such as the decline of species. Rather, she turns to language itself—through the double meanings of articulation—to suggest that representation must take new forms, ones that blur and refuse old boundary markers and categorizations and which create new alliances and relationships of power. These new articulations are deeply inscribed with a collective moral imperative: they are born out of politics and are political from the moment of their inception. This sense of social and political responsibility comes through in her return to the illustration of a Kayapo Indian man, who is videotaping his tribesmen in advance of a social protest against a hydroelectric dam (1992, page 314):

“We are all in chiasmatic borderlands, liminal areas where new shapes, new kinds of action and responsibility, are gestating in the world. The man using that camera IS forging a practical claim on us, morally and epistemologically, as well as on the other forest people to whom he will show the tape to consolidate defense of the forest. His practice invites further articulation—on terms shaped by the forest people. They will no longer be represented as Objects, not because they cross a line to represent themselves in ‘modern’ terms as Subjects, but because they powerfully form articulated collectives.”

This understanding of representation as articulation and of articulation as alliance across difference has informed research in human geography and much of the humanistic social sciences for nearly twenty years. It spawned countless important articles, especially in feminist geography and anthropology, on ethnographic method and participatory research (eg, Katz, 1994; Kobayashi, 1994; Moss, 2002; Wolf, 1996). Although Haraway’s early work revolutionized thinking about the politics of representation, it did so not through an abdication of the responsibility to represent but, rather, through a rethinking and renaming of the project. Similarly, in Spivak’s (1988) chapter “Can the subaltern speak?” she noted the impossible challenges ever present in any effort to establish a voice and speaking position for subaltern groups, while at the same time encouraging those who were trying to do so. In furthering
theory and tackling injustice both scholars noted the difficult but vital importance of relying on (and constantly critiquing) a community of praxis rather than merely on individual observations, passions, or celebrations. This runs counter to the general mood of NRT, which frowns on boring, ‘normative’ concerns such as these and favors, instead, an attention to our personal bodily encounters and emotions. Popke (2008, page 1) writes, for example, “Human geography seems especially invigorated these days. Geographical scholarship is abuzz with passion, performance and affect, infused with a sense of playfulness and a spirit of optimism and experimentation. All of this appears to betoken a new understanding of ethics, as well, one that is less about dour denunciations of injustice or sober analyses of normative principles, and more about enhancing, and celebrating, our immersion in Being.”

Children’s politics
A personal, microconception of politics is privileged over macrounderstandings and investigations in some contemporary children’s geographies, as is evident in the frequent reference to the small-scale and the banal. Taking the banal seriously is part of a wider fascination with “things that go on and on and on” (Horton and Kraftl, 2006, page 259, original emphasis), which some NRT proponents feel are frequently unattended to or underestimated in much of the geographical research on children. “We are sure that, somehow, an attention to the deeply banal and affective stuff of everyday lives might give us yet more reason to critically ponder some long and deeply taken-for-granted understandings about ‘Growing Up’, childhood and adulthood” (page 260).

A focus on the banal is intended to help elucidate larger issues and understandings from the bottom up. But these larger issues are rarely identified, except as somewhat amorphous concepts such as ‘growing up’, ‘the extraordinary’, or ‘hope’. NRT proponents argue that it is exactly these types of concepts and bottom-up assemblages which cannot be adequately represented in words or other symbols and which exceed normative categories, through which affect is expressed and a new politics can emerge. Anderson (2006, page 738) writes, for example, “The expansion of the political, and the practice of politics, is therefore underpinned by an understanding that affect takes place as ‘something more, a more to come’, which enables a point of view on ‘the edge of the virtual, where it leaks into the actual’” (quoting Massumi, 2002, pages 215 and 43). Politics, in this conceptualization, exceeds conventional categories, takes place on the edge, leaks between entities, and often lacks a particular referent to which it can be attached. It is perceived to be open to more possibilities and opportunities than those allowed by normative political theories.

In an article focusing on the ontological ‘blind spots’ of these arguments Barnett (2008) points out that the politics of affect rests on normative claims—for example, of the value of democracy—just as do other, more conventional understandings of the political. Our concern in this paper, however, is more that the barely concealed contempt for theories of dominance and subordination and analyses of power relations (such as those around gender, sexuality, race, or class) often leads to the inability or unwillingness of scholars to identify these types of processes in specific research settings. The fact that specific research ‘events’ may be embedded in larger patterns of systemic violence is frequently impossible to discern because of the bias against historical analysis.

In some cases NRT proponents have criticized others for making these types of connections—for example, between particular embodied events (such as children’s play) and larger political and economic forces. Harker (2005), for example, critiques the work of Aitken (2001) for locating children’s play in a larger (neoliberal) framework.(2) He argues that Aitken’s analysis runs the risk of circumscribing key nonrepresentational and disembodied

(2) Aitken theorized the process of children’s play as a form of resistance to the increasingly productivity-oriented, rational, and time-policed world of adults.
'feelings' such as affect. Harker uses Deleuze's work on the body and nonhuman encounters to emphasize the ways that moments of play should not always be tied to the body, and argues that the "materiality or physicality of a body exceeds representation" (page 55). In his own fieldwork example he writes about a moment in which affect emerges in between the actors involved when a boy hits a girl on the back in class and then gives Harker a 'complicit glance'. This is framed in his researcher's diary in the following way:

"After a while, the boy sitting diagonally behind me, turns around and gently hits the girl sitting next to me on the back. She immediately suspects him (he has a reputation of being class joker), and tells him not to do it, without saying it so loud that the teacher hears. I keep an eye on him now, and he soon turns around again, gives me a complicit glance and gently hits her again. The girl turns and confronts him, and in his defense he blames the boy sitting next to him. A short argument with his neighbor follows, before he begins to (not so gently) hit his neighbor as punishment for supposedly hitting the girl. All the time this is happening, the girl is watching, and all three are smiling" (Harker, 2005, page 55).

Our concern with Harker's paper focuses on the relationship between embodiment, power, and subjectivity. In our opinion these encounters and the moods, experiences, moments, or affect they engender are very much tied to individual bodies and subjectivities as well as to a particular time, place, and form of human interaction. A feminist framework could elucidate these links and also help to anchor the research findings in understandings that link up to a wider, relational politics (cf Bondi, 2005; Jacobs and Nash, 2003; Nash, 2000; Thien, 2005). Yet this 'anchoring' is exactly what Harker wants to avoid, quoting Massumi to indicate why he eschews theorizing an articulation between the body and a locatable (anchored) place or perspective: "affect 'is not ownable or recognizable', but 'inseparable from but unassimilable to any particular, functionally anchored perspective'" (Massumi, 2002, pages 28 and 35; quoted in Harker, 2005, page 56, emphasis in original). Yet this nonrepresentable 'thing' or moment that is being represented in the article as affect involves a strong interpretation by the researcher as to what is actually going on. Harker uses the above account from his diary to talk about how "affect can be thought of as flowing between bodies and is thus intersubjective, or better still asubjective, since it 'escapes' actually existing structure [sic] things" (page 56). He then gives his own interpretation of this supposedly disembodied interaction: "In my playing moment during the Year 4 Science lesson, we could say that a mischievously joyful affect (briefly) flowed through the children and me. None of us 'owned' this feeling, nor was it located 'in' any of us. Yet it was crucial to our enactment of that particular moment" (page 56).

We use a brief anecdote here as a way of pointing to some aspects of this interpretation that we find troublesome. In her ninth grade science class a child of one of the authors was kicked (gently) under the table by the class joker as a 'playful' way of recognizing 'kick a redhead day'. She smiled and ducked her head when this occurred. A casual observer in the classroom could easily have interpreted this as a mischievous and joyful moment but, in fact, it was part of a larger pattern of harassment (over several months) that had multiple causes and effects, including an effort to humiliate a perceived teacher's favorite and the exertion of male dominance over a subordinate female. The reaction of smiling was her desperate attempt to avert further attention. One of the material effects related to the 'enactment of that particular moment' was a disruptive mid-year classroom change to avoid further 'playful' hitting and a girl's incipient aversion to science. In this case there was a politics to 'the event' that was deeply gendered, which occurred before and reverberated after that moment, and which could only be even partially understood by an outside observer as a result of in-depth fieldwork and the ability and willingness to theorize nonrepresentational structural processes such as patriarchy.
Was there a similar gendered politics in the interaction described by Harker? The reader has no way of knowing because there is no account of his method other than that he kept a research diary while he conducted a personal ethnography in Bristol at a school of 300 pupils during the summer of 2001. How many days did he go? How many students did he interact with? Did he interview the girl or the boys involved in ‘the event’? Did he talk with teachers or the principal, or investigate previous events or patterns of behavior in the classroom or the school? The reader does not know. Yet it is only through these boringly normative types of questions, shared as ‘research methodology’ with other scholars, that it becomes possible to situate the knowledge that has been produced, assess it as part of a wider scholarly community, and ascertain, to a partial extent and in collaboration with the work of others, whether or not this interpretation of the affect of ‘the event’ has any merit for others.

The personal, self-referential quality to methodology in much of NRT-inflected research such as this insists on the moment, occasioning methods that are as ephemeral as the events that are witnessed. Below is an example from a paper on children’s play from a section with the subheading, “Methods: thinking–writing–doing”:

“So, how to prepare a paper about little things that matter, and the ways in which they matter? Our method was to contrive a situation in which to begin talking about all or some of this. At an allotted time, we forced ourselves to sit down together for five minutes, in the office where we work, and scribble down the first things that came to mind” (Horton and Kraftl, 2006, page 260).

In addition to resisting articulation with a wider politics or set of established social science methods this methodology also firmly resists any shared conclusions, even at the level of the personal epiphanies of the authors themselves:

“Maybe these topics happen to resonate with you too; maybe not. Certainly, the fact that they happen(ed) to matter to us says something—although we are not sure what, exactly—about who we are, and where we come from, literally and metaphorically (maybe Aside#1, on ‘us’, below provides some clues; maybe not)” (page 261, emphasis in original).

Other work on children deliberately downplays hierarchies of power in the research process, despite decades of feminist and postcolonial scholarship indicating the critical importance of theorizing unequal power relations in fieldwork.

“Reframing the research encounter as performance causes us to deconstruct the notion of hierarchical relations between researcher and researched, adults and children. It is seen that power relations cannot be reduced to powerful and powerless along essentialised lines of difference. Rather, power is fluid; it is performed, and thus open to negotiation” (Woodyer, 2008, page 352).

Part of the attraction of this approach is the advocacy of “identities as fluid, context-specific and performed, and thus open to contestation” (page 352). But these insights are the same as those pursued by many feminist and postcolonial critics, who also critique essentialism and believe in the investigation of material practices in any attempt to understand subjectivity formation or how relationships of power play out in space and time. It is the ongoing concern with history that is the crucial difference here and which forms the fundamental divergence in these different analyses. Woodyer (2008, page 354) writes, for example, “Practice brings about ephemeral spaces and times that only exist as they are being played out. The best one can hope to achieve is to evoke a sense of the event and the liveliness that took place.” Because of the insistence on “embodied information … experienced in real time” (page 354) as the only valid information to be captured in research, a longer perspective, in which ongoing or systemic hierarchical relations of power might be observed, becomes impossible (see Tolia-Kelly, 2006, page 213).
NRT proponents frequently claim to open politics up to new, more radical and ethical ways of thinking (Amin and Thrift, 2007; Thrift, 2004). We find instead that much of NRT research presages a closure of politics, or, more accurately, a depoliticization of ‘events,’ through its emphases on the personal, the affective, the individual, and the ephemeral. There is a lack of concern for a politics of articulation, which can be seen in, among other things, NRT conceptualizations of witnessing (Dewsbury, 2003; Harrison, 2002). Unlike similar ideas by feminists such as Oliver (2004) and Butler (2004), who trace witnessing to subjectivity formation and relational ties, the “call to witness” (Harrison, 2002, page 500) for NRT proponents extends primarily to paying individual attention to what is in front of one, including the importance of noticing and reflecting on one’s personal emotions, such as being clumsy, wearing glasses, feeling bored, wanting sleep, or other ‘small-scale’ enactments of Being (Anderson, 2004; Ashmore, 2011; Horton and Kraftl, 2006; Kraftl and Horton, 2008). While some invoke the necessity to empathize with the pain or joy of what is witnessed rather than merely describing it, this tenderness is often deliberately disarticulated from a politics that is analyzed collectively. Jones (2008, page 1610) writes, for example, “to witness is more than just observing and reporting on an event, it can be to share and deeply empathize with pain and suffering … and otherness—without fully knowing it. Pause to think how often it is that understandings of and response to current/historical events are not prompted by explanation or analysis but by witnessing of one kind or another.”

The link between these witnessed events and larger processes of dominance and/or subordination is thus largely left implicit, or rests on obscured, normative beliefs that make it difficult to build a community of praxis around the issues or events being witnessed.

Butler (2004), in contrast, argues that while bodily integrity, awareness, and emotiveness are important, they must always be considered in a dialectical relationship to a wider politics. From this starting point she is able to claim that mourning is not inherently solipsistic, even though it is seemingly located at the scale of individual and/or ephemeral bodily emotions. She argues, instead, that it furnishes a sense of political community because passion, grief, and rage can and should lead to greater dependency and social coherence, which end up binding us to others.

“Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex character, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility” (page 12).

In her example, which is deliberately linked to a specific set of American policies related to the Iraq War and the unconscionable treatment of Palestinians and Guantanamo prisoners, relational ties are initiated through feelings of grief and communicated through language—through representations such as words and maps, through articulation—with the double meaning of communication and connection or alliance. In the following section we introduce a case study to underline the importance of articulation in the political lives of the children with whom we conducted our map-based research.

The articulations of researchers and children
Methodology and structure
Our fieldwork research with children in a YMCA-sponsored after-school program took place between October 2009 and May 2010. We created a computer-based mapping program for middle-school children, aged 11–13 years, as a participatory research project designed to encourage greater geographical (neighborhood) awareness and political participation among youth in poorer parts of the city. The school where the program was located enrolls about 500
students, over 95% of whom are racial or ethnic minorities and 75% of whom qualify for a free-and-reduced-meal program for low-income families. The broader school neighborhood has some of the highest levels of crime and poverty in the city.

The research team consisted of two faculty, two graduate student research assistants, and two undergraduate student interns from the University of Washington. During the fieldwork period we met with the children once a week (with the exception of holidays) in the afternoon for 90 minutes. Although we brought enough laptop computers and had space and technological access for up to twelve students, the classes varied in size from two to eight, with many children moving back and forth between our program and other after-school programs or sports, and others dropping out to care for siblings or because of parental fears about the child’s safety on the way home in the late afternoon. The inability of many children to stay through the entire program was one of many examples where it was clear that outside pressures affected the children’s choices of when and where they could go and what they could or could not do during the day.

During the eight months that we engaged with the children we taught them about maps and mapping using old-fashioned paper maps, GoogleMaps, and an interactive web platform designed by our research team. We then asked the children to map and comment on their everyday journeys, their favorite places in the school, neighborhood, and wider city areas, and the best places for kids, and we also conducted a number of other exploratory mapping exercises.\(^{(3)}\) The children were able to add photographs and comment on their own maps and those of the others. We also mapped the interior of the school together and went on two mapping field trips around the wider school environs, asking questions about various places along the way. The research team actively taught and encouraged the students. At the same time, each member of the team made detailed observations about the research process, which were compiled in a joint fieldwork journal. We kept all of the artifacts, including maps, drawings, and text created by the students.

One of the main reasons that we believe the collaborative mapping exercises we engaged in with the children were significant to their political formation was because of the manner in which the children were physically and emotionally constricted in many other aspects of their everyday lives. For example, one of the conclusions of our research, discussed below, was that the actual process of talking, writing, and mapping freely together about spatial and emotional encounters—with adults who were not parents or teachers—gave them a rare opportunity to publicly articulate themselves in relation to a wider world. Without an in-depth analysis of the highly constrained geographical and historical context in which their lives were situated we could not have grasped the political importance of these articulations, which were made possible through the safe, public venue of shared representational practices that we created as well as through the unusual social relationships that we formed with them.

Some of the children’s physical constraints were expressed through everyday journey maps, which showed extremely limited mobility and little awareness of the city beyond the home and the school. When given a disposable camera and asked to take photographs of places of interest between home and school, one boy took the entire roll of his bedroom, which was where he spent all of his time outside of school. (This extreme constraint occurred because both his parents worked during the day and part of the night, and considered the neighborhood to be unsafe for him on his own.) Institutional problems also prevented the kinds of student mobility afforded to children in wealthier and/or safer neighborhoods. For example, even though we had arranged to pay for a van and driver, and had prepared a personalized tour of our university and university-based museum, a field trip outside of

\(^{(3)}\) We are indebted to Blaut for these methods, developed in his innovative work on children’s mapping, which he conducted over several decades (see, for example, Blaut, 1997).
the neighborhood with the children had to be cancelled because of ongoing difficulties in coordinating with the understaffed YMCA program, with safe afterschool transportation, and with parents’ working schedules.

Some children were restricted in their spatial movements both inside and outside the school because of bullying, others because of gang activity. SmithJohn (all pseudonyms were chosen by the children themselves) told us on more than one occasion of being bullied because of his religion. We wrote about this in our field notes:

“He [SmithJohn] in particular is having a tough time. He told us toward the end of class that another kid hit him in the face because he’s Muslim and said, ‘You guys blow stuff up’. A teacher saw it and the other kids got in trouble, but his exasperated response to my question about the teacher’s reaction seemed to hint that this is happening with some regularity (ie, to SmithJohn it matters less that the other kid got in trouble—what matters most to him is that he got hit in the face)” (7 April 2010).

This example of individual bullying reflected a wider, school-based problem, as manifested in the lockdown of all of the boys’ bathrooms during one of our visits in the spring.

The fear of gangs was referred to often, both as a way to let us know about specific locations we passed by on our walks (eg, the corner right next to the school was noted as a gang hangout) and as a way to tell us about emotional and spatial insecurities that were experienced by the children. These types of constraints and concerns (including the death of a brother from gang-related violence, and the long-term separation of families through the migration process) were expressed frequently—both graphically through locations and comments on maps and verbally—by the children in our interactions with them. They also mapped and discussed everyday concerns such as the location of favorite or disliked classes, and the best places to buy certain kinds of food. In the next section we look at some of the ways in which the children mapped themselves into and out of the spaces of their world through articulating some of the ‘rules’ of power to us—both enabling and constraining—in which they are enmeshed. We argue that it is through relational processes such as this that political beings are formed.

### Mapping rules

In one of the first (paper) mapping exercises we initiated we asked the children to locate their homes, their school, and a favorite place with a marker. Two children immediately wanted to locate places off the map of Seattle that we had supplied. Chewbacca wanted to put a marker on Thailand, which is where his parents were from and where a much-loved older brother still lived; BillyBobBingBong wanted to indicate New York as a favorite place as this was the last place where she had spent time with her brother before he was killed in gang-related violence and it was where her father still lived. These two examples were our first indicators of the types of difficulties the children were facing in their lives, involving death, violence, families stretched across thousands of miles, and profound issues of both emotional and physical security. It also showed us some of the inadequacies of our own plans for the children’s mapping regime. Their everyday journeys and geographical imaginaries were not those of home to school or through various places in the neighborhood, as we had conceptualized, but, rather, focused on the connections between a safe bedroom and a village in Thailand. The children made us aware of the rules governing much of their lives through breaking ours. They requested new maps so they could show us their actual worlds and the broader political and economic forces affecting their lives.

At the same time, in a later class the children also expressed humor and sly forms of transgression having to do with their relationship to the spaces of the school. BillyBobBingBong wrote “I hate this class” next to one of the classrooms that she had mapped, and Sidique wrote “am I in trouble?” in a thought bubble adjacent to the principal’s office. Through their
map comments and discussions with us, they communicated the rules of the school, their relationship to these rules, and the forms of power that the rules delineated. They let us know some of the local, micropower relations in which they are enmeshed, the articulation of these rules to wider systems of dominance and subordination in which they are entangled, and the ways in which they navigate these relations—that is, as subject to but not completely subjected by forms of institutional, familial, and other systems of adult governance.

By explaining the functions of different school spaces and the rules governing them, and then mapping themselves into the school in subversive or humorous ways, they were witnessed by us as active participants in the rules of the school. Through the mapping exercise, they became rule-makers, participants in an adult world. Although they were easily able to challenge our very limited authority over them to produce these maps and comments, they preferred to use the representational tools we gave them to contest or poke fun at certain forms of authority or norms of conduct. There was thus a certain recognition that the use of these technologies to represent their worlds gave them an aura of maturity and hence entry into the adult world, which enabled a far wider ability to articulate (both literally and through connection) a spatial and emotional politics that mattered to them.

This kind of representational maturity is often eschewed by NRT proponents, who worry about being confined by “‘adult’ expectations” (Thrift, 2004, page 84). For poor minority children, however, the risks of being perceived by older people as (forever) immature and even uncivilized are very real, and are linked to the ability to communicate with language and other symbolic codes accessible to the adult world. In participant research with children, Wood and Beck (1994, page 59) write of the ways that knowledge of the spatial rules of the home is intimately connected with a sense of being civilized, and even at a deeper level with being human. An awareness and articulation of ‘home rules’ is critical for the children of the house (Chandler, Denis, and Randall below), who indicate their human belonging and distinction from barbarity and animalism through this knowledge:

“Don’t stamp on the floor (Chandler)
Don’t use it as a skating rink (Randall)
Don’t scratch up the floor (Denis)...
Don’t walk on it with muddy feet (Randall)

What is the floor that one should not walk on it with muddy feet?
It is not mud.

To annul the distinction between earth and floor is to annul the distinction between home and environment, between culture and nature, is to regress, is to return to the clay whence we came. To track the floor with mud is to betray the ground on which human beings stake their difference, is to become animal, to be barbarous (etymology: to be incapable of speech, like an animal)” (1994, page 59).

In her research on primatology Haraway (1990) noted the frequent trope in which the categories of white and male were associated with ‘S’cience and black and female were associated with nature. She argued that white men are rarely at risk of being perceived as anything other than human and can be secure in their nonanimal status; they are not perceived to be so close to nature and the animal world that they risk their human status through boundary transgressions. Women, people of color, and we would argue children, however, do not have this same level of security. Children are always at risk of being perceived as uncivilized or animalistic in the eyes of adults—indeed, much of children’s geography has been motivated by a desire to work against these characterizations. Certain kinds of

(4) Thrift (2004, page 84) writes, for example, of wanting to be “purposively immature … to throw off some of the weight of ‘adult’ expectations by privileging renewed and challenging limits.”
significations and representations help children learn how to negotiate the spaces and codes of ‘humaness’ and hence have the opportunity to articulate their worlds and, by doing so, form meaningful connections with adults.

**Discussion**

“Articulation is the production of identity on top of differences, of unities out of fragments, of structures across practices. Articulation links this practice to that effect, this text to that meaning, this meaning to that reality, this experience to those politics. And these links are themselves articulated into larger structures, etc.”

Grossberg (1992, page 54)

In this paper we have shown how children’s incipient political formation can take root in the social spaces created through collaborative alliances and processes such as speaking, writing, and mapping. Their understanding of their world and the rules and relations of power in which they are enmeshed are articulated through representation and connection; children are given social meaning and political purchase through shared symbols in adult–child alliances. This kind of politics is not recognizable in a Habermasian ideal-type conceptualization of rational civic engagement but neither is it formulated through disarticulated ideas of performance or affect.

Like Haraway (1992) in her discussion of the Kayapo, Hall’s conceptualization of articulation reworks older understandings of representation (as passive and subjectifying) into more active significations of connection or alliance across difference. Epistemologically, it is a way of representing unities out of fragments, which allows a nonessentializing, nonreductivist analysis of social formations. Politically, articulation provides a lens foregrounding power relations and practices of dominance and subordination (Slack, 2003 [1996], page 113). And as a strategic tool articulation ties all these together with a purpose: to grasp “something of the truth about new historical realities” and to engage and rearticulate them (Hall, 1983, page 84). Articulation insists on an intrinsic connection between theory and praxis. Hall (1988, pages 69–70) writes, for example,

“The object of the work is to always reproduce the concrete in thought—not to generate another good theory, but to give a better theorized account of concrete historical reality. This is not an antitheoretical stance. I need theory in order to do this. But the goal is to understand the situation you started out with better than before.”

For us the concept of articulation provides a theory, a method, and a politics. It is not just a connection but also a process of creating connections (Slack, 2003 [1996]). In this it provides us with the tools necessary for participatory research, tools that we feel are lacking with NRT approaches when applied as research methodology. We used an illustrative case study of children’s political formation in an after-school mapping program to draw attention to some of the problems of evental observations that lack analyses of history or power and which eschew strategic articulations for change. In so doing we focused our critique on scholarship that derides “dour denouncements of injustice” (Popke, 2008, page 1) but offers up body therapies and somatic exercises as an alternative. “Perhaps ‘we have to stop pushing words and start moving limbs: stop talking and start dancing’” (Shusterman, 1997, page 129; cited in Thrift, 2000, page 245).

Among NRT’s impacts in geography are ideas as to what counts as political; for many theorists of affect a broader concern with articulation, with political ideologies and alliances, has given way to a greater interest in ideas about personal difference and identity. For some but not all NRT proponents making a connection between these two realms is no longer considered necessary. A critical form of politics can thus be located solely in the subliminal
feelings of the individual, who can be swayed—for good or for ill—by affective experiences. As Leys and Goldman (2010, page 668, emphasis in original) noted in a recent interview, “The whole point of the general turn to affect among recent cultural critics is to shift attention from the level of political debate or ideology to the level of the person’s subliminal or sub-personal material—affective responses, where, it is held, political influences do their real work. I shall be arguing that the disconnect between ideology and the body, between meaning and affect, hypothesized by theorists such as Brian Massumi and other like-minded writers, produces as one of its consequences a relative indifference to the role of ideas and beliefs in politics in favour of an ‘ontological’ concern with people’s corporeal—affective experiences of the political images and representations that surround them.”(5)

While there are many theoretical issues at stake here, the key point for us is the move this makes from theories of politics based on the interrelational dynamics of articulation to those which take the personal self as their ultimate locus of knowledge. It is the lack of necessary connection between these realms that we find the most troubling for it allows the elision of dominance and subordination in research analyses. In our case study we highlighted the structural dynamics of power relations shaping children’s movements and geographical imaginations in order to manifest the (to our minds) critical importance of situating fieldwork studies in a larger historical and geographical context. Because of the privileging of the noncognitive in NRT, as taken up by some children’s geographers, we also attempted to counter this by foregrounding the critical political importance of intentional practices such as collaborative mapping and writing. We argue that representational strategies of articulation are vital in forging meaningful social relationships between children and adults; they allow children to cross over from their ‘animalistic’ infancy and young childhood into the adult-constructed world of ‘humanness’. For poor children, in particular, practices that do not engage representational codes are not necessarily liberating (as they may be for privileged adults) but more likely to be the reverse. Children are often ignored, punished, or expelled for embodied practices that do not signify (quite literally) in the world of adults.

The contemporary interest in new ways of thinking about politics and the political in children’s geographies is important and valuable. Much of this literature has been vital in witnessing the political lives of children beyond adult-constructed ideas of the rational liberal subject. Our caveat here concerns the limits of bodies of thought, such as certain threads of NRT, which were intended initially as philosophical interventions but which have been taken up as qualitative methodologies in geographic research. Much of this work celebrates supposedly noncognitive, often individualistic practices and the ephemeral moment, and downplays historical or structural analysis as well as sustained scholarly collaboration. The problems and ironies for those children’s geographers who take up these ideas have to do with the risk of depoliticizing exactly what many are hoping to make political through their work.

Acknowledgements. We wish to thank our research and undergraduate team for 2009–10: Ryan Burns, Tricia Ruiz, and Anna Xue. This work was supported by the National Geographic Education Foundation (grant number 2008-UI03) and the Spencer Foundation (grant number 20100052). Any errors in the paper are the responsibility of the authors.

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(5) We found this interview via Clive Barnett’s blog (see Barnett, 2011).
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