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Editorial

Less-than-human geographies

It was freezing cold, snow covered everything: the Jews, chilled to the bone, hurried to the selection point in the hope of leaving the camp as soon as possible. They were loaded into trucks driven by Ukrainian drivers; their belongings were piled separately into other vehicles. Then they were brought in convoys to Rogan, a remote suburb of the city, and shot in *balki*, ravines chosen by our surveyors. Their belongings were brought to warehouses to be sorted and then distributed to *Volkdeutschen* In this way, the camp was emptied in small groups each day. Just before the New Year, I went to attend an execution. ... Fresh blood splattered the snow, flowed into the bottom of the ravine, spread in pools on the ground, hardened by cold; it didn't freeze, but stagnated, viscous. All around, the grey, dead stems of sunflowers dotted the white fields. All sounds, even the shouts and the gunfire, were muted; underfoot, the snow crunched. ... Everything was white, terrifyingly white, except the blood staining everything, the snow, the men, my coat. In the sky, great formations of wild ducks calmly flew south. (Littell, 2010: 176)

I have taken this passage, almost at random, from Jonathan Littell's 975 page epic novel, *The Kindly Ones* (originally Littell, 2006). It recounts the war-time experiences of Max Aue, an SS intelligence officer, somewhat implausibly moving between the Eastern Front, the siege of Stalingrad, the running of the death camps and then the fall of Berlin. Aue does not excuse his involvement nor deny his guilt, but strives to contextualise his experiences: indeed, relentlessly to contextualise the times, places and events witnessed, as well as his own (in)actions, through an often indigestible mass of detail about countless materials, human and non-human, personalities and machines, psychologies and ecologies, that were the stuff of his war. The contexts suggest an accumulating push of the worlds in which Aue was unavoidably caught, hinting at what kept happening for him in those nanoseconds between event and its recognition, yet alone rationalisation or provoking of repulsion. Swimming into view is the chrono-logical gap between act and its apprehension which has been the departure-point for much non-representational geography (Harrison, 2000; Philo, 2011: 366-367), the gap wherein the 'animal human' seizes life before the 'human human' can do much about it, when the human folds into what other geographers are now routinely calling the 'more-than-human'

(eg. Greenough, 2010, 2014) or, in Aue's case, what could equally be cast as inexcusably *inhuman*. I will return shortly to such matters.

These dimensions of Littell's book speak to an emerging concern with 'violence and space', as addressed in a recent *Political Geography* theme issue (Springer & Le Billon, 2016), and I was reading them in readiness for some discussant's comments at a recent symposium on 'Geopolitical Violence', organised by Ian Shaw and Emma Laurie. In my mind I kept calling the symposium 'Violent Geopolitics'; and, when finally realising my error, it gave me pause to contemplate a possible distinction to be drawn between the referents of these two terms. First, *geopolitical violence* - starting with the geopolitical and how, discursively, institutionally and practically, situations are created in which violence may occur and also stressing its *longe durée*: less the violence of the immediate, intimate act, and more the violence resulting from the sedimentation of inequalities and toxicities which produce the 'premature deaths' of 'surplus populations' (Tyner, 2013, 2015). And second, *violent geopolitics* - starting with visceral, embodied violent acts and only then gradually widening the optic to the environing geopolitical settings, imperatives, institutions, structures: a perspective foregrounding the punch to the guts, the knife in the back, the shot to the head. The former focuses on what has been termed 'structural violence', capturing the intersection of geo-inflected economic, political and social forces with all manner of routine, banal, everyday privations and abuses. Geographical inquiries to date have arguably concentrated much of their energy here, as in Jenna Loyd's (2009) reflections on how multiple 'harms' - notably as militarisation and health concerns co-mingle - must be set "within broader histories and geographies of colonialism and contemporary structural violence" (Loyd, 2009: 870). The latter focuses on what has been termed 'direct violence'; and - while appreciating why Loyd (2009: 870) cautions against "[a] too narrow focus on direct violence", and acknowledging awful moments of embodied violence that *do* feature in many geographical works - it might be argued that the sheer violence *of* violence, bloody and brutal, rarely commands geographers' centre-stage in any sustained fashion. Maybe there are good reasons why this should be so, resisting what could be construed as a voyeuristic pornography of violence or a fatalistic victimology, wishing instead to chart routes back to a more positive, optimistic politics of challenging the spatially constituted preconditions *for* violence, harm and suffering.

Maybe, though, there is a need - as supplement, not substitute, for geographies of structural violence - to pursue other lines of inquiry which venture closer to the directly violent acts themselves. There are signs of such a move when

Rachel Pain (2014: 544), pioneer of feminist inquiries into spaces of violence, critiques the complicity of “scholars ... in the ... distancing of different forms of violence along a scaled system with its implied judgements of magnitude and significance” (Pain 2014: 544). Her critique cautions against prioritising ‘global terrorism’ over ‘domestic violence’, and by extension insists that what is ‘close to home’, the intimately near-to-hand, be subjected to forensic investigation so that the intimate ‘terrorisms’ of the ‘domestic’ – the “fists of power, hitting, slapping, kicking”; “the rage that keeps banging on the door” (Anon. no date) – are not allowed to hide any longer (also Pain 2015). I am convinced that such a feminist geopolitics of violence parallels something of what I wish to argue below, perhaps with theoretical skeins of connection akin to those spied by Rachel Colls (2012), but my muse in what remains of this editorial is to contemplate how an attention to direct violence might also appear in – and what implications it might then hold for – the orbit, intimated earlier, of non-representational and more-than-human geographies.

The passage above from the Littell book arises when the narrator, Aue, is describing an emerging pattern of planned ‘executions’ of Jewish populations caught in the wake of the German advance into Eastern Europe during the earlier years of the war (through to the siege of Stalingrad in 1942-1943). As the German forces swept across Eastern Europe, there was a geopolitical imperative to keep secure the occupied zone behind the frontline, a task taken on largely by the SS (*Schutzstaffel* or ‘Protection Detachment’) and entailing the systematic obliteration of all potential dissidents. Already, under Nazi racial ideology, the Jews had become regarded as ‘internal enemies’ subject to violent persecution, and it was in the woods, mud and snow of Germany’s Eastern conquests that this violence began to translate into organised mass killings. Here was one foreshadowing of the death camps; and, indeed, Littell’s novel charts this progression, not least by occasional nods to early experiments with gassing Jews (and sometimes mental patients) in trucks or other mobile units. Here, moreover, was geopolitics meeting biopolitics: geopolitical needs to secure territory meeting biopolitical needs to exterminate unwanted others: for me, the confluence of geopolitics and biopolitics lies at the bruised heart of what we should be saying about ‘violent geopolitics’ (as others have proposed: eg. Kearns, 2014).

Littell’s account is punched through with objects: with tangled and terrible ecologies of nature and (in)humanity; of machines and bodies; of plants, animals, flesh, blood, bone, guts; of pitted fields, burned-out farms, brooding forests: and most of all, of whole landscapes frozen solid, running red on the starkest white of

snow and ice. Aue struggles through such landscapes, often wracked by fits of vomiting, sometimes with weapon in hand and death at his fingers, sometimes wanting to run, to protest, to say this is wrong (but never daring to do so, even as he seeks, self-loathingly, to inject small mercies into the great terror). This narrative is resolutely material, replete with constant outworkings of both material power and the power of materials, describing ever-shifting and contingent violent assemblages, wherein, we might say, *human* agency cowers as limited, situated, contextualised. Yes, in some ways, it is all unbearably human: the human-made miseries multiplied over and again, as the ducks, indifferent, fly south. But the human is not centralised: the agency is dispersed, everything is enrolled in the violent geopolitics as stage, curtain or prop; and there is a complex geopoetics in how Littell tells his story, carrying Aue along as much as he carries along the story (as a curiously unobtrusive first-hand narrator even when in the midst of bizarre, sexually-enflamed dream sequences).

Moving to the chief message of my editorial, these features of Little's novel have led me to wonder about whether there might be warrant for thinking not of more-than-human geographies, but rather of *less-than-human geographies*. The more-than-human-geographies 'turn', if I can call it that, has recently enjoyed a hugely influential period of ascendancy. Inspired by diverse intellectual currents – the materialisms of ANT and assemblage theory; the elaborations of new animal geographies and vital ecologies; the post-phenomenological (re-)engagements with being-and-dwelling-in-the-world; the affective charges in 'the push of the world' disclosed by non-representational geographies and, to an extent, emotional geographies – numerous scholars have offered stunningly fresh insights into the multiple worlds of human-geographical concern. These are worlds where the human is now *added to* prodigiously: where accounts of what is happening in/with those worlds cease to be anchored around any limited sense of the human – certainly as a simple Cartesian bearer of a coherent, singular, self-aware self encased in an equally coherent bone-and-fleshy mounting; and where accounts explode additively around the human, whose capacities for agency (for being, doing, feeling, speaking, acting) are enhanced and distributed in a mazy mesh of countless other things, beings, spirits and chimera. The human *as* human almost ceases to exist, or necessarily becomes radically re-thought. The human *as* the crucial occupant of human geographies almost dissolves, now being just-one-amongst-many-others, co-mingling, jostling, jousting, jesting. The human *as* source of human geographies disappears, or rather takes its places in a much more extensive, vibrant orchestra of co-producers all with roles to play, paths to take, and so much to add. And hence

the *more-than-human*.

There is a pervasive tone to these more-than-human-geographies. They are and feel rich, lively, enlivened, indeed vital; they seem to promise so much more excitement, energy, charge than was true of the supposedly 'deadened geographies' of work by older generations (Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000). These new geographies – these new ways of casting light upon the vibrating, gyrating, dancing geographies of the world, or many worlds – are enchanting, bewitching, seductive, chock-full of hope, optimism, of new politics and new ethics for new times. The additive textures of these new geographies seem *addictive* or enchanting (Woodyer and Geoghegan, 2013): heady, hedonistic substances with which to experiment in a whirl of new creative moments, scenes, memes and screens. There can – and should – be no evading the wonderful contributions now stirred into the mix of our efforts as contemporary human geographers: the more-than-human-geographical project has surely been a force both about 'the good' and for 'the good'. Characteristically, Nigel Thrift, such a key figure here, reflects on "how to inhabit" what he identifies as "the cusp between present and future", pondering the value of experimental work – fostering 'practical skills', creating 'emancipatory spaces', inhabiting new 'temporary worlds', practising 'new arts/sciences' – through which "we might learn to breathe differently by discovering a lot more about the slight surprise of action in every encounter. That's what I hope, anyway" (Thrift *et al*, 2010: 197-198). Such are the additive, addictive, enchanting seductions of these highly *moreish* geographies.

And yet ... Acknowledging Paul Harrison's (2008, 2009, 2015) lonely struggle in much the same registers as these non-representational and more-than-human geographies – his struggle to allow in less vital instances of exhaustion, hesitation, sleepiness, corporeal decay, pain, being 'a loser' – there is maybe a whole *other*, more expansive, trajectory to explore, a flip-side, an antipode, which I now somewhat glibly signal as less-than-human geographies. This would be an approach to the study of worldly human geographies confronting foursquare *not* what enhances the human, distributes it, grows its capacities, amplifying its affective reach and involvement, adding to the human in a manner that enchants, enthrals, enervates. But, rather, it would be an approach alert to what diminishes the human, cribs and confines it, curtails or destroys its capacities, silencing its affective grip, banishing its involvements: not what renders it lively, but what cuts away at that life, to the point of, including and maybe beyond death. It is to ask instead about what *subtracts* from the human in the picture, what disenchants, repels, repulses – what takes away, chips away, physically and psychologically, to leave the rags-and-bones (and quite likely broken hearts, minds, souls, spirits) of 'bare life' (after Agamben, 1998). In *lieu*

of the additive demands of post-structuralism – ‘and, and, and’; building, enriching, layering – it is to address what might, with apologies to Badiou (Dewsbury, 2008; Shaw, 2007), be figured as the subtractive demands of, if not structuralism, then a species of critical theory ever-alert to what gets taken away from the world (or worlds) to give *this* world, here-now, where *this* world means potentially a hillside of shallow graves sticky with mud, blood, brain, guts, spades, cartridges and unutterable *inhuman* horror. Stripped down; hollowed out, winnowed away; splintered, shattered, smashed; dis-assembled, dis-located, dis-membered; subtracted from, again, again, again: such is the melancholy cry, or embittered scream, of a less-than-human geography.

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