

## **PCS Conference 2016 Keynote Address Proceedings<sup>1</sup>**

**Title:** *Achieving Interconnected Praxis: Connecting new theoretical potentials to material outcomes in Physical Cultural Studies*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Physical Cultural Studies (PCS) project is not only oriented around the development of academic theory and discourse, but is instead driven by an imperative to craft theory and political action as an integrated process. As Atkinson (2011) discusses those that engage with PCS must commit to utilizing “the politics, problems and possibilities of research as a lever of engaged praxis (p. 140). In this address I will open up discussion about how new theoretical developments can create new political possibilities, as well as exploring the expectation that the political engagement derived from these approaches should entail a certain fidelity to their underlying logics.*

*As much as the empirical should inform the theoretical, theory should also feedback into the methodological and the praxis of those that claim their part in PCS. As Foucault (1980) states in conversation with Deleuze, “theory does not express, translate, or serve to apply practice: it is practice” (p. 208). A statement to which Deleuze (1980) responds: “[theory] must be useful. It must function. And not for itself. If no one uses it, beginning with the theoretician himself (sic), then the theory is worthless or the moment inappropriate” (p. 208). As such PCS as a project should embrace new theory that more accurately responds to the materialities of lived experience, but that this should inform the development of what I will term an ‘interconnected academic practice’.*

*Using my own examples and encouraging others to share their experiences and ideas, this keynote is the opening statement in a conversation about living up to the theoretical-political imperatives that run deep in the roots of Physical Cultural Studies.*

### **PRESENTATION INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Hello and thank you all for being here for this presentation today. It really is an exciting opportunity to return and have the chance to speak with you all. As the title of my presentation suggests I will be exploring some ideas around connecting novel theoretical trends with the potential they may entail for new political possibilities, and

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hopefully, if I keep my presentation to a minimum, we will have plenty of time to exchange some ideas on what it means to develop an interconnected praxis. However, before I get started into the core of my presentation I wanted to take some time to thank a number of people and reflect on the importance of what this conference has grown to be.

Having sat in the audience as a student for four years it was difficult to understand how important this rite of passage has become for those that graduate from the program. If my PCS history serves me right, Ryan and his cohort spearheaded the creation of this event in part to give those early career graduates from the program a chance to add a 'keynote' presentation to their CV's. Yet I think it has become vastly more valuable than that for everyone that attends. It allows students to try out new, and potentially experimental ideas, it creates a space of connection with a community of scholars both near and far, it gives faculty a chance to check in with their students thinking; and for alumni it provides a chance to reflect on where they have been, where they are, where they are going, as well as a moment to reestablish their relationship with the project.

For me it has afforded time to reflect on just how special this program is, and the people that are a part of it. Some people are more savvy or aware than I am... or potentially more brilliant at what they do... but for me leaving Maryland and PCS was a lesson in how difficult this career can be, and that finding a place or creating a setting like what we have here is a massive challenge. This is not to say that the program is immune from the pressures of academia, and that at times we are all stretched thin by being a part of the project in a larger sense. However, for myself at least, the support those in the program continue to offer has been significant to my development.

For being willing to support the PCS program as it creates an environment for students to have experiences like mine, and for fostering of events like this I want to thank the School of Public Health, the Kinesiology department – especially Bianca Garcia for organizing my trip here today – and all those who have been champions of the PCS faculty and students. I also want to thank all those connected with the PCS program both past and present. There are a number of people in this room that I had the pleasure to overlap with during my time here and having the ability to wrestle through ideas with you all has been amazing, so thank you. Yet more broadly I want to thank you all for what you do.

Lastly I want to thank my wife and my daughter for being here. It is very special that Kate and Maggie are with us today to watch me do this. I will take the opportunity to drag my daughter with me to as many of these things as possible before she starts thinking I'm boring or embarrassing, and even at only three months old I already know those times are extremely limited.

## **POLITICS AND DEVELOPING A PRAXIAL MODE IN PCS**

I was really inspired by the title for the conference this year and its alignment with things I have been contemplating recently. **Engaging Health and Physical Culture: Power, Politics, and Possibilities** gave me some options as to where to go with this discussion, but connecting with the idea of politics, and the possibilities embedded in the exploration of new ways of interrogating that term, I think continues to be extremely prescient. There is a persistent conversation around exactly what the political impact of the project should be and what the praxis of PCS practitioners should look like. I for one

applaud the determination to focus on these issues. Especially within the current academic climate in which we are pushed to streamline our work towards ends that serve the contemporary institution. Publishing in well ranked journals, developing fundable research, and teaching more and more students are demands we all face. Therefore the points at which we have decided to take a stand in order to make our community engagement and political action central to our practice should be celebrated. This is not a new challenge for projects that share similar political and community facing sensibilities, indeed Grossberg (2010) talks of the CCCS and those that were part of the center having to negotiate, promote, and defend their “commitment to the political responsibility of the intellectual” (p. 19). Equally the extended variety of academic traditions that PCS scholars bring with them into this context draw on a number of academic and activist projects that also reflect this orientation. However, what is true of the contemporary context is that it presents a number of unique challenges that reflect a qualitative shift in the expectations for the nature of academic work, as well as an intensification of the expectation for us all to be more entrepreneurial and to ‘do more’, with all that statement entails.

Today I want to add to this conversation, in particular thinking through how the use of theory from outside of what have become the traditional theoretical areas of PCS requires us to re-imagine the political commitments of those that identify with the core of the project. I am not attempting to propose anything that is particularly radical, but look to present just one way through which to further advance the project in its imperative to be a theoretically informed, but also engaged form of academic praxis. It is not a suggestion that PCS has to this point failed to achieve outcomes that adhere to this

imperative, but is an attempt to start a collective re-thinking of what it means to be politically engaged, especially as we continue to impact on new issues and utilize new theoretical tools to do so. It is an attempt to grapple with a similar conversation that happened between Foucault and Deleuze in the early 1970s. In that back and forth Foucault (1980) stated that “theory does not express, translate, or serve to apply practice: it is practice” (p. 208). A statement to which Deleuze (1980) responded: “[theory] must be useful. It must function. And not for itself. If no one uses it, beginning with the theoretician himself (sic), then the theory is worthless or the moment inappropriate” (p. 208). To plug in new theory as part of our research and writing without letting it fully permeate our whole approach to being an engaged, or as some would describe, a public academic, stunts its effects and limits its possibilities. If it does not have practical applicability starting with the theorist, then the moment might just be inappropriate or in Deleuze’s polemic, the theory may be worthless.

Through discussing two theoretical areas I have drawn on in my academic work and beyond, I want to highlight how these can demand a particular orientation that must inform a broad reconsideration of practice, including how we think through forms of political action. What I want to demonstrate is that efficacy in what we aim to do has the potential to be expanded when we can align our experiences, the empirical, the theoretical, and the praxial. Certainly we can consider ourselves as ‘rounded’ academics through work in each of these areas as discrete aspects of whom we are, but through bringing these together new possibilities are potentially opened. Hopefully I can speak to some of the ways in which I am taking small steps in order to live up to the inherent

expectations of an approach that exists at the intersection of the two theoretical areas:  
Affect theory and the ideas of assemblage.

## **THE CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES OF NEW THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS – WORKING FROM ASSEMBLAGE TO AFFECT**

As I worked towards developing my research for my dissertation I considered a number of potential areas to study and questions to ask. However, one idea kept raising its head as I searched for a starting point. Now some would say it was selfish and self-involved to choose a topic that was a past time of my own, cycling. Indeed the development of work that services interests of my own, from my particular position, would to an extent have the potential to fail to consider the most pressing issues of those marginalized within society today. I don't disagree with this viewpoint necessarily, but luckily at the time of the start of my research issues around cycling were becoming more prominent and were increasingly fundamental to a growing contestation over the spaces of our cities. In a post recession context the once evacuated urban centers of the U.S. were in a flux as the profit potential of these now relatively inexpensive spaces was being realized. The potential of cities to reinvent their sense of 'cool' as creative community settings was becoming apparent, and as the economy shifted a trend started that has realized itself in extortionate housing prices, the provision of 'creative amenities' (crossfit gyms, post industrial housing styles, open air markets, CSA's, Uber coverage, dog parks, frozen yogurt shops), and transportation options that are alternatives to the car – with the most privileged of these being the bicycle. For all its potential to service a healthist imperative, solve the environmental crises of urban landscapes, and generate

new forms of local consumption, cycling has become a symbol for a wider shift in what cities are, and the sorts of people that are welcomed as citizens in a deep sense. The infrastructure and programs that service cycling for transportation and recreation have become a materialized short hand for a conversation about privilege and marginalization, a means to explore what bodies and practices get counted. Indeed the development of urban bicycling can be suggested to fit within, and to an extent illuminate, the inequities of the neoliberal urban project (Stehlin, 2013; Gibson, 2013) oriented around “polarizing labour and housing markets, property and market-led development, retrenched public services and social programming, and accelerating intercity competition for jobs, investment, and assets” (Peck, 2009, p. 159). As such cycling in many ways is part of a pattern of development that has done little to reverse widespread urban inequalities, including discrimination in mobilities infrastructure and programming.

In this way bicycling became the focus through which I could combine a personal passion, with in depth knowledge of a physical culture, and a commitment to do work that attempts to contribute to the erosion of inequity and injustice. It became an entry point to interrogate impactful processes of power as they became accentuated in the intensities of urban life, while fundamentally reorienting my place within these communities. In many ways bicycling was a point of entry into exploring the specific and messy formation of the city, while simultaneously allowing me to dig deeper into the specificities of what ‘cycling the city’ means.

For these multiple reasons cycling presented the ideal context to do the work I wanted to do, however what became obvious very quickly was that the critical position I wanted to take was not prominent or popular. Research and the application of theory

abounded about how to increase the presence of cycling and its infrastructure, yet few voices rung out alone in asking critical questions of the uneven nature of these physical cultures and practices. I sought out research that could provide a guide, work that questioned ideas of mobility in critical ways, even if cycling was not part of that conversation, and this became the basis of the ways in which I wanted to start to theorize what I was seeing in the field. Certainly many of these ideas and theories continue to inform my work. Urry's work *Mobilities* has been seminal in the area and work by Stehlin, Gibson, Lugo and others has asked a number of key questions about issues of equity in cycling. Additionally Furness' detailed research into the radical potential of cycling was significant and illuminated much of the path toward thinking about the possibility of the bicycle to function as a tool for reshaping our social relations and systems of meaning, as well as the points at which it fails to function in this role. Yet my initial experiences spending time in these cities, interviewing and observing, continued to challenge my thinking and flowed outside the boundaries of these well established theories. I needed something else to be able to fully give voice to what I was seeing and experiencing. The well-trodden sites of community formation and the institutions of structuring cycling often failed to truly represent key spaces within these physical cultures, and I needed a different frame to make-sense of what I was encountering. I regularly had to interact with often impromptu and increasingly decentralized forms of urban governance, and experienced a complex informality to how urban cycling was structured. Born out of some similar underlying processes these trends portrayed a physical culture that was responding to, and was an outcome of, fundamentally unsettled patterns in municipal planning, and the oversight of urban mobilities from previously



taken for granted systems. In turn this was creating new logics for governing the city. In retrospect I was struggling to come to terms with what can be either seen as the latest iteration of the neoliberal project or something that represents a post-neoliberal moment. Luckily around this same time several students inside and outside of PCS were struggling with these same questions and together we set up an independent study titled '*Critical Urban Experience*'. As part of our work we explored theories that could give us a language to more effectively talk about the complexity of our empirical experiences.

What stood out to me most was two lines of thought, those that centered on studying the materiality of affect, alongside those looking at applications of the idea of assemblages within an urban setting. Both offered some specific elements, as well as key points of overlap that gave me a new framework and language to discuss what I was encountering in the field. What also became very clear was that both of these theoretical areas necessitated not only a shift in thought, but also a reorientation of how I performed my methods, and, as I would later realize how I carried out my politically engaged forms of praxis. As Dewsbury (2011) states, "the assemblage concept configures a dramatically different way of conceiving the world" (p. 149) and demands a total reconfiguration. At the same time Thrift (2004) suggests "affect is also the discovery of a whole new means of manipulation by the powerful" (p. 58). In combination the use of these terms demanded variously intersecting and differentiating ontological, theoretical, methodological, and also importantly political modes. Indeed uses of these approaches by some of their most significant proponents have always essentially adhered to an encompassing nature in their application. When looking at Assemblage McFarlane (2011) suggests that Deleuze hoped the left would form into political assemblages and

that “The concept of ‘left assemblages’ [would function as] a political subjectivity oriented towards the actualisation of ideals and the realisation of potential” (p. 205). The assemblage not only became a way to understand the function of the social, but it was also a means for developing a political engagement that accessed and focused in on new potentialities found in emergent and always in process social formations. Similarly across the broad range of what has been discussed as the affective turn, referring to a range of contemporary developments of affect theory, the term refers not only to specific ontological, theoretical, or methodological frameworks, but also types of political praxis. Roelvink (2010) proposes, “As a politics, affect can create feelings of possibility in the context of hegemonic ideology and hopelessness” that can expand the “political field because it introduces awareness of endless possibilities in every moment and brings attention to practices that might capture some of these possibilities to create change” (p. 112).

In combination affect and assemblage became grounding concepts in my study of urban cycling, and whilst they are not necessarily inherently political terms, their prominent application as such enhanced their relevance for what I was trying to achieve with my work. However, what became clear very quickly was that to combine my praxial commitments as a PCS practitioner with a fidelity to the logics that underpin the development of these two theory-methods/political-action frameworks, I would have to start exploring ways to develop an interconnected practice; a systematic application of the underlying logics that run from the theory through to all aspects of my practice as an academic. It would mean connecting affect and assemblage concepts in a number of areas, which in turn could create the context for a more effective and impactful utilization

of the terms. Now this is not to say that my attempt to fulfill this duty to the totally encapsulating use of these concepts in combination has been complete, or even regularly successful. Yet I have already made a number of choices to align my actions as a practitioner with the core of what is central to these ideas. Certainly there are many ways to approach assemblages and affect theoretically, however I believe through embracing a broadly relational and non-representationally aware approach “the context of our always intersubjective relations offers more promise for politically relevant, [and] emphatically human” change that can have positive outcomes for our social worlds (Roy, 2013, p. 3).

### **MOBILIZING AFFECT AND ASSEMBLAGE FROM THEORY TO PRAXIS**

In my writing and research I have gone to lengths to always draw in ideas of the assemblage and affect. Sometimes this is both together, and at times it entails drawing on a selection of concepts from within each of these broad areas. Utilizing a consideration of ideas such as emergence, indeterminacy, complexity, distributed agency, affective atmospheres, non-representational interaction, materiality of feeling, and a number of others, has been a regular part of my writing. It is an application of theory that is born out of a need to speak to changes in the fundamental nature of the social, as well as a necessary reconsideration of the importance of the affective as a site of power. Thus it is a mode of thinking about physical cultures that does not have to be drawn into providing linear and definitive explanations. Rather scholars can embrace the idea that “Some of the tangled relationships that lie before us may co-exist uneasily with one another, to the extent that it may seem odd that they are part of the same formation” (Allen, 2011, p. 154) and that urban physical cultures are tightly bound into cities existing as “roiling

maelstroms of affect” (Thrift, 2004, p. 57).

These theoretical developments have in turn necessitated the use of a different set of methods. Not always novel techniques, but always an innovative combination of existing modes of inquiry. In particular I have brought together elements of the humanities, ‘hard’ sciences, and the arts to engage the affective as a means for discussing the physical as a set of experiences where “sound mingles with smells, with perceptions of body movement and skin sensations – with tactile, olfactory, sensorimotor and even gustatory schemes of interpretation” (Saerberg, 2010, p.371). Additionally I have attempted to create an ‘ethnography from the edges’ in my work to grasp physical cultures as assemblages, starting my exploration of urban cycling communities not from previously stated central spaces or actors as “it is practically impossible to know in advance the definitive list of human and nonhuman actors involved, affected or concerned, the scope of their networks or their actual relationships” (Farias, 2011, p. 366). Instead I have sought to follow actors that leave traces as they actually act (in the Latourian sense).

In response to this central shift in method and theory, I have also started to consider forms of presentation I want utilize when sharing my scholarship, and ask some significant questions about what I want my work to do. At this conference last year my colleague Jake Bustad gave a presentation that we prepared together. It attempted to combine the academic language we want to utilize to advance as a means of rigorously discussing the essentially non-representational nature of physical practices, with video and sound that would in part evoke the corporeal and affectively charged experience of these practices. As Jake spoke video and sound played, the conscious representational

dimensions of our research were expressed as intimately tied into the corporeal, experiential, and extra cognitive experience of the moments from which the research was drawn. It was an attempt to present these dimensions to grasping the physical as equally important and simultaneously consequential to its shaping of the moment. The non-representational plane of affectivity will always shy away from representation, so that “as concepts go, affect is not proving the easiest to grasp” (Lorimer, 2008, p. 551), but we still believe it is important to continue to attempt to draw on innovative forms of representation, even if they will continue convey a limited view. Coming up this month Jake and I will attempt to advance this presentation, this time with both of us playing a role in the delivery at the Eastern Sociological Society annual meeting in Boston.

Outside of these in person presentations I have also spent more and more time thinking through new sites and platforms to house this critical work that necessarily does not fit into the normalized academic format. In light of this thinking a number of my colleagues, friends, and I are in the beginning stages of constructing the model for a multi-sited and multi-media space for critical physical culture scholarship. It is intended to combine high quality and accessible writing with audio, video, art, photography, and in person experiences centered on the physical. It is in part a rejection of the expectations put upon us all within contemporary academia, a movement away from the problematic structure of the current journal system, an opening up of a more accessible conversation on the issues, a utilization of a range of media formats that can more readily invoke the affective, and will create a broad reaching assemblage of contributors that hail from a range of locations. While still in its infancy, it represents another dimension to the ways I am attempting to interconnect my academic practice.

## **CONCLUDING THE ASSEMBLED, AFFECTIVE, AND INTERCONNECTED ACADEMIC LIFE**

In part all of these projects, and the many more I am a part of, represent a purposefully and at times necessary combination of often distinctly originating areas of work for myself, and it is often only in retrospect that I can recognize the exact nature in which they function as part of an interconnected and politically engaged praxis. Yet I can recognize the importance of seeking a multitude of sites, relationships, and projects that assemble into my career, and indeed my life. This has become a considered and important act.

Now, being open to the emergence that comes from an indeterminacy to the nature of my work continues to be challenging, ever more so with the changing nature of my family, but I believe it is the best way that I can commit to the demands of the academic path I tread. Certainly I am not the best example, or a particularly good working model for what this interconnected praxis can be. I fail and could do a lot more to be politically engaged, to have a better praxis, and to do this in a further interconnected way... however, it is a potential first step in the reestablishment of the conversation about how we all seek to commit to our theoretical tendencies, methodological practices, and forms of political action.

I want to finish today with a quote from Shaviro (2009), who discusses at length what the Deleuze-Guattarian assemblage can do as a model and describes it as such: “it is not a totalization, a definitive tracing of limits, or a final theory of everything. It is rather an expansion of possibilities, an invention of new methods and new perspectives, an

active ‘entertainment’ of things, feelings, ideas, and propositions that were previously unavailable to us” (p.148–9). For me a similar belief in what this theoretical framework can facilitate, alongside a number of others, urges a commit to a fully engaged application of this model of thinking to embrace the potential of what it can do. All I can encourage you to do is look at the approach you have embraced in your scholarship, open up possibilities it provides, and explore the new perspectives created when you allow it to become the basis for an interconnected praxis.

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